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Saving The Daylight
A Eulogy for Tim & Sharon

by

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Introduction

During the creation of planet Earth, two mythical pillars were raised. One guided the planet in its path around the sun while the other amplified the rays of sunlight to a level that made life on it possible. Hidden deep within the inner Earth and connected only through a magical portal, these otherworldly columns ensured the wheel of seasons continued its endless cycle. The eternal harmony appeared unbreakable until a sinister giant and his corrupted followers threatened its very existence. Two thousand years ago, the malicious giant Munrir was banished by fate to the inner Earth for his crimes on the surface. A giant's nature does not allow them to change their diurnal rhythm, so he spent two millennia underground, burning with the desire for revenge. Unable to withstand daylight, he sought to darken the skies, his only chance of returning to the surface for good. With promises of power and influence, he enticed an entire order to aid him in his rise to godhood and domination over the world.

To prevent the impending disaster, prophecies and visions were granted to the good-hearted among the magical folk. Dreams appeared in the minds of respected wizards and witches, granting them clear insight. While a troublesome coalition of vile magicians plotted their schemes, their noble counterparts formed a task force dedicated to fulfilling the prophecy. The looming catastrophe could only be stopped by a young witch from Scotland. Yet such a weighty responsibility would have been too much for one person alone. Therefore, a suitable assistant was needed, or as magical folk call it, a witch's Paladin. A young lad from the endless valleys of South Germany's Black Forest was yet to discover that he was destined to follow this calling. To play his part in saving the daylight.

Chapter one – Carefree Days

For some people, the world holds all doors open, while others arduously struggle to make even the slightest progress. Yet there's a third category of individuals, those destined to follow a particular calling. Sometimes, even in their carefree childhood, they sense a faint hint of what lies ahead on their path. Tim Meyer belonged to this third group, though had anyone informed him of this before his adventures unfolded, he would have dismissed them as utterly delusional. Like many children, Tim loved to draw, but the creations born from his youthful imagination vastly differed from those of his peers. At first glance, his pictures portrayed battles between a disciplined army and a fearsome band of magicians led by a sinister giant. However, upon closer inspection, the intricate details of the battle emerged clearly, there were wizards and soldiers on both sides, confronting each other fiercely on the battlefield. These drawings depicted a recurring dream Tim had throughout his childhood. Yet, as he grew older, the memories of these dreams gradually faded, eventually disappearing completely into the forgotten corners of his past. Even his parents and relatives dismissed them as mere fantasies conjured by a young boy's imagination. Contrary to everyone's expectations, these visions would one day become reality.

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Tim hailed from Kühltal, a quaint small town nestled within one of the narrow valleys of South West Germany's Black Forest. Just a handful of settlements perched on top of the low ridge mountains. Dense canopies of dark-green needle trees majestically covered the higher slopes and hillsides. During early mornings, a mysterious fog often shrouded the forest in a veil of white, adding to its enigmatic charm. Standing around six feet two, with hazelnut-coloured hair and green eyes, Tim didn't particularly stand out from the others. The year 2015 would mark the turning point when his quiet, uneventful life, a life he cherished would dramatically change forever.

#Choosing the right profession is an integral part of a young adult's life. Plenty of Tim Meyer's friends picked craftsmen's work. Although he wasn't entirely without prowess in this particular field, others were simply quicker and more adaptable. Tim realised that he was indeed better at organising compared to the rest, thus he decided to become a regular office clerk. To pursue this career, he had to gain practical experience in a company and acquire theoretical knowledge at a vocational school, which is still standard procedure throughout Germany. The school he selected for this purpose was about thirty minutes away by car. From an architectural perspective, it represented what architects in the early nineties envisioned as futuristic. With its large glass windows and square structure, it stood upon a high plateau one would reach by travelling further southward into the valley. The spot was often brightly illuminated due to its open location on the outskirts of a medium-sized town. Wide-open fields, loosely scattered trees and distant industrial sectors were visible from his classroom windows. Inside that pseudo-futuristic classroom, Tim forged a meaningful and strong bond with a young Turkish Alevite named Bedirhan Alemdar. If he and Tim stood side by side you'd see no difference in height. Though Bedirhan's hair was black and curly, making it almost impossible to comb no matter how diligently one tried. Ironically, this allowed him easy access to a dope hairstyle by simply cutting the sides short. Bedirhan's eyes boasted a turquoise hue, a somewhat classical feature for Turkish people. Tim greatly cherished their friendship, as learning and chatting with Bedirhan was always a joyful experience. Just as every social circle possesses its very own structure, Bedirhan and Tim naturally assumed the role of companions who instantly joined forces whenever the curriculum required it.

A local in this part of the world would consider June, July and August as the three months of summer. Sunny weather, warmth and holidays just around the corner would be the first things coming to mind. For Tim and his classmates, the ninth of July signified their final day at vocational school, the conclusion of their third year and the time to reap the fruits of their labour.

A gentle ray of sunshine illuminated the table at which Tim and his friend sat. In close proximity stood a cluster of young ash trees. Their juvenile branches danced playfully in the wind, which not only delivered much-needed relief from the heat but also coaxed Tim into intermittent daydreaming. He allowed himself to be distracted by the tranquil scene outside before a nervous remark from Bedirhan pulled him back to the present. "*Bro, we've been working our butts off throughout this year. If I catch one bad grade in my school report, I'm going to lose it."* There was a hint of worry in his tone, which amused a girl one row behind named Elizabeth. *"Calm your titties,"* the petite blonde remarked. *"You're unironically one of those people who shiver before getting any grade, despite receiving a B+ at worst."* Julian, the crafty classmate seated beside Bedirhan, came to his aid with a witty rejoinder. "*That's easy for you to say, Elizabeth, since you're one of those getting an A anyway. I'd bet money on it."* The atmosphere within the classroom was a unique blend of summery serenity and nervous anticipation.

Curious about the time, Tim glanced at the clock on his phone. "*Eleven am already, I wonder what's taking her so long,*" he muttered mildly irritated. Almost as though his remark was some sort of previously agreed cue, their young female class teacher, Miss Maibaum, entered the room carrying their grades and a large box filled with various ice creams. A tiny droplet of sweat ran down her forehead, perhaps she was in a hurry. "*Time just seems to fly by sometimes, doesn't it?"* she remarked nonchalantly. *"You've been such a great class, my favourite one, I'd say."* In a swift movement, she brushed away a stray strand of her dark brunette hair from her cheek. Miss Maibaum's keen eyes took note of the class's brimming nervousness and anticipation. "*To ease the tension, you've all passed. Especially you shall relax,* Bedirhan*, one more shade of red and the supermarket's tomatoes would have some serious competition."* Elizabeth struggled unsuccessfully to contain a hearty chuckle, but the young Turk was mature enough to take it with pride. *"So sit back, grab some ice cream, and receive your grades."* After everyone received their certificate, even the last trace of worry crumbled away, while the final lesson faded into memory.

It was time to bid farewell to school. The students realised that a new chapter in their lives was about to begin. For Tim Meyers, however, this new phase would be shrouded in mystery and the unexplainable. The heavy doors with large panes of glass framed within sturdy metal frames were opened wide by a far less pompous doorstop as hordes of students left the scholarly institution, swarming into the warmth of summer. It was a hot and sunny day. Tim was neither fond nor averse to summer, he was content with it as long as the heat didn't become too bothersome . Side by side, he walked with Bedirhan towards the parking area, part of the school's property. There was something he wanted to inform his Turkish friend about. *"There's going to be an epic barbecue this Friday evening,"* Tim said. "*I'll be there, along with Franziska, Dennis, Ronald and his girlfriend, maybe even Martin." "Damn, even Martin? He's not outside that often,"* Bedirhan replied, slightly surprised. Tim's eyebrows furrowed with concern for this member of his social circle. *"He's regularly depressed for some reason. I'm not entirely sure why."*

At that very moment, the first Sign manifested above him, forcing Tim to stop in his tracks and stare at it, spellbound in awe. A breathtaking formation of clouds had frozen him: a woman with long, wavy hair weaving clouds extending from her spindle, an unmistakably clear image painted in the sky. It being a serendipitous assembly randomly formed by droplets was simply impossible. Bedirhan noticed Tim's shock, which left him looking almost dumbfounded. *"Bro, Bro, Brooo!"* Bedirhan said firmly, attempting to regain Tim's attention. Tim rubbed his eyes, and the cloud-weaving woman disappeared. *"I was just a bit carried away. Where was I? Ah, yes! Will you join us this Friday?*" Relieved, that Tim was back to normal, Bedirhan replied, *"It would be an honour, but I can't make it. My girlfriend and I have our anniversary and planned to eat somewhere fancy."* This was true. Bedirhan had a well-established relationship with a Volga German girl named Ekaterina. It had been rocky at first but had grown stronger over time. Ironically, Bedirhan had often turned to Tim for relationship advice during those early, complicated days of this relationship. Most people perceived Tim's love life as far from satisfying, if one could even speak of it at all. He had only ever had one real girlfriend back when he was a young teenager.

It had all seemed very promising. They had spent a lot of time together, shared their first affections and had their first kiss. It wouldn't be wrong to say she introduced love into Tim's life. It felt almost addictive, and he developed a deep fondness for romance as well, appreciating beautiful scenery and gained a sense of different ambiences. Eventually her parents moved away, and the young man was still light years away from getting a driving licence. Regularly using public transport would have been far too expensive. This first ardent encounter with the amorous side of life changed him profoundly, regardless of how much he tried to dismiss it. "*I understand. Yolo, let's hang out another time. Remember, we still need to decide on a second product besides the table desk lamp. If we want to make the online business profitable, we have to take it seriously."* His Turkish friend nodded vigorously. *"I'm taking it very seriously. I'm still amazed at how well it's started."* It's worth mentioning that Tim and his friend had established an online shop with their own brand not long ago. They primarily planned to sell home appliances. Working with a dear friend felt like a good start into adulthood, although his fate was about to take a drastic turn.

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Reaching the car park, Bedirhan and Tim bid farewell to each other with a brotherly hug. "*See you around, and don't let the bedbugs bite!"* Tim said jokingly. *"Ha-ha, where did you pick that up from?"* his friend asked, clearly amused. *"From my online pen pal from Norway, Richard,"* Tim explained. *"Dank, see you around,"* were Bedirhan's final words of the day as he got into his car. Tim continued walking towards his own vehicle, which he always insisted on parking in the same spot. It was a late 2000s BMW 3 Series coupe. His mother had bought it for the family, but since his dad drove less and less and her workplace was within walking distance, Tim ended up using it and paid for its upkeep. In practice, it became his car. An untamed assembly of grass and tiny bushes bordered the car park. Directly in front stood a fairly modern iron railing, dotted with patches of rust amidst its paintwork, it marked the boundary of the school property. The grass shone a healthy green, vibrant and full of energy, brushing away the image of the spinning woman in the clouds, or at least Tim did his best to make it do so.

Was Tim really entirely unfamiliar with inexplicable incidents? There was one occasion when he predicted the future in a dream. The dreamscape depicted him walking on a pavement next to a school he was about to attend back then, alongside a new friend who was yet unfamiliar to him. The vision foresaw an incident which occurred as he had attended a different school for some time, and there he recognised both the new friend and the landscape from his dream. This experience remained etched in his memory, tucked away in some distant corner, serving as a stark reminder that phenomena might exist beyond the bounds of logic and reason. Tim started the engine and set off homeward, his emotions tinged with the whimsy of bidding farewell to a place where he had spent plenty of time.

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He drove along the country road, which saw only sporadic traffic, typical for a Thursday late morning. Normally he would have tuned in to music during his drive, but today, Tim found himself lost in thought. The seemingly endless landscape of pine trees, valleys, and houses melded seamlessly with his contemplative state. *"I haven't listened to the radio in quite some time. Perhaps it's worth a try again,"* he considered. Barely moments after this decision, another inexplicable incident unfolded. The radio station began airing old hip-hop instrumentals, a departure from its usual programming. Not averse to this type of music at all, as he frequently listened to it to properly relax, he kept listening. However, the unusual nature of this airing raised his suspicion. *"Quite odd, isn't it? Perhaps it's some sort of rare nostalgia theme day. But then, why only the instrumentals?"* he muttered, confounded. The overseas track came to an end and gently faded away, followed by an intermission from the radio host. "*This next one is truly a timeless classic, my dear listeners. But let's shift gears, folks. Have you ever encountered something inexplicably eerie, defying all logic as if it were no big deal? You're minding your own business, maybe just wanting to head home, and suddenly, out of nowhere, there it is. Sit back and enjoy the ride because you're about to encounter much more of it." "Oh yes, Tim Meyer, this one's for you!"* A chill ran down Tim's spine, sending shivers through his body. In what twisted sense of logic would something like this ever make sense?

"Damn those secret agencies, monitoring us like it's 1984 and even having their own share of fun doing so!" His hastily constructed self-explanation clearly revealed the frantic attempts of someone doing his utmost to stay grounded and regain coherence. With a trembling finger, he silenced the device. The young German struggled to shake off the host's words. What was this all about? Why was he being directly addressed regarding mysterious phenomena? There had to be a logical explanation, but none was readily available to Tim at that moment. Still gripped by slowly fading panic, his eyes took in the familiar sight of Kühltal's town sign. After crossing a bridge separating the southern and northern parts of the village, he turned left. The last few metres of his journey ran along a poorly maintained one-way road that followed the lively streaming river. A row of modest family homes stood along the way, each reflecting the essence and preferences of its inhabitants. His parents' house, so ordinary one could almost label it dull, came into view. He had the second floor entirely to himself, the two apartments separated by a stairwell. Tim spent most of his time there, only visiting his parents for lunch when possible.

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Tim Meyer parked his BMW in the garage and stepped out through the driver's door, casting one final suspicious glance at the multimedia interface. Although directly adjacent, there was no door connecting the garage to the house. With his schoolbag slung over his shoulder, he walked around the corner towards the entrance. Lunchtime was approaching, and having nothing else planned, Tim decided to join his parents, Alma and Klaus Meyer, for a meal. However, even this simple intention came to nothing when he spotted a note attached to the first-floor apartment door. *"Hey kiddo, the delightful weather tempted us to dine at the nearby Italian place by the bridge. We've ordered you some kebab pizza, enjoy it and see you later. P.S. We know you received your grades today, but they're bound to be good as always, so feel free to share them whenever. Wishing you an epic afternoon, your parents."* Hardly a minute had passed before the pizza delivery man arrived. Tim opened the door to a skinny, half-bald Italian. The unexpected, yet by no means unwelcome pizza had arrived. After the usual exchange of money for food, the delivery man made a cryptic remark. *"I wish you a magical rest of the day."* Tim raised his eyebrows and replied, *"Thanks, I suppose? Have a pleasant day yourself."*

Armed with his schoolbag slung around his shoulder and the pizza in hand, he took the last few stone steps upstairs and opened the dark oak wood door. Tim's apartment featured a minimalist interior, a deliberate choice reflecting his preference for simplicity, a theme that represented his character better than anything else. During the last five years, he meticulously constructed a comforting cocoon around himself. Not a golden but a grey cage composed of endlessly recurring rituals, safety nets and comforts. Behind his superficial nonchalance, Tim suffered from deeply rooted insecurity accompanied by a self-limiting fear of failure. With swift movements, he changed from his street clothes into more casual attire. If you got to know Tim Meyer, one thing would stand out: he often wore business shirts and trousers when he went out. Some of his friends were curious and asked him about this habit. His usual responses were, "*I prefer to dress more maturely*," or "*I like being perceived as well-groomed."* Whether that was the truth or just another layer of his self-crafted charade remained a mystery.

He went to the bathroom to wash his hands, and once done, it was finally time to eat. Although there was a living room, he rarely used it. If certain parts of an apartment could experience emotions and were asked about it, Tim's living room would express feelings of abandonment. Eating, working and relaxing indoors usually took place in his bedroom, where his desk and PC were. Tim placed the pizza on the desk and added some extra spicy flavour. One small thing remained, the drink. With quick, decisive steps, he entered the kitchen and started boiling water for peppermint tea. The steaming tea invigorated his senses and brought a relaxed smile to his face. *"Tea is civilisation!"* he proclaimed as he carried the teapot, cup and saucer back to his bedroom. Another of his habits was watching videos on YouTube and other platforms while eating. He scrolled through his recommendations and began enjoying the pizza, though he couldn't decide what to watch. *"I might just watch some funny excerpts of the Palatine Junkyard Brothers,"* Tim thought. Yet again, his routine was disrupted by another peculiar event. He squinted at his screen, casting a suspicious glance. *"How I Became a Witch. Seidr, the Old Norse Magic. Shamanism in Siberia. Voodoo in Africa. The Hollis Gondler Five-Minute Podcast. Holy met barrel, that's weird, strange and odd!"*

"I've never clicked on such topics before. Why are they recommending this?" Tim's annoyance with those seemingly unpredictable mysterious mishaps grew into hopeless frustration. He brushed off the first layer of it and continued with his day. Next to his office desk, a glass door led to a small balcony. Tim's favourite viewpoint. Though a low ridge mountain, proudly presenting its wealth of needle trees, partially limited the view, it still offered a good vantage point over the small town thanks to the absence of tall structures. Slightly nervous, he looked up at the few fluffy clouds decorating the light blue midday sky. *"Please let it be normal. I'm sane, I'm sane,"* he muttered, hesitantly daring to observe them. This time he was fortunate, the clouds appeared ordinary, relief washed over him like a calming shower.

"Maybe I was just daydreaming," Tim pondered, ignorant of all that had happened. *"I don't actually want my life to change. It might be a bit boring, and I'm without a significant other, but I still like it, it's lit. Bloody radio host, sometimes we don't want change, ever thought of that?"* Tim shook his head disapprovingly, a young adult averse to adventures. He glanced over at the structure he had spent his middle school days in. It was a typical Victorian-era building with a sandstone foundation, integrated Roman columns, and brick walls. Tim had formed most of his friendships there, new acquaintances were rarely made afterwards, with loyal Bedirhan Alemdar being one of the exceptions. "*Should I tell them about those unearthly incidents this morning? Probably not. They'll either think I've completely lost it or assume that I'm already a bit drunk,"* Tim frowned, reaching a final conclusion. *"Let's see if I can bring up at least some snippets of it."* To his left, a train traversed the valley, its rails bordering the forest, disappearing as quickly as it appeared. An image of speed amidst the valley's slow pace. Some ravens sat in his parents' garden, nonchalant. People back in the day saw them as messengers between worlds. "*This Friday barbecue, next Friday or Saturday the river light festival. Seems like I'm entertained for some time."* Nothing would stop Tim Meyer from attending those occasions. He was meant to experience a lot throughout the upcoming days, although vastly different from what he expected.

Chapter two – The beginning of a Mystery

Tim Meyer forcefully pushed aside all thoughts and contemplations regarding his recent peculiar encounters as best he could. It wasn't in vain, his somewhat stoic nature allowed him to decide which thoughts to entertain and which to dismiss. On one hand, this offered the advantage of making level-headed choices without the risk of emotion-driven short-sighted judgements. On the other hand, there was the constant risk of misusing it to banish uncomfortable truths he had to face. The day passed uneventfully, and night fell. It was a typical summer night, warm, with a sky full of stars and air filled with the chirping of crickets. Contrary to Tim's strict rigorosity regarding lifestyle choices, he retained a deeply rooted fondness for scenic places and enchanting atmospheres. Before going to bed, Tim took a cold shower to cool down. Feeling refreshed, he settled comfortably into his double bed, lying directly in the middle, occupying both sides. One could say he had grown used to being alone, unbothered by the thought of change. Over time, it seemed, one simply became accustomed to it. He soon drifted into the realm of dreams, where, as some say, the soul travels at night.

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He found himself in a setting unlike any he had experienced before. A tranquil sun shone upon a seemingly endless fenlike landscape. The water's surface was gently caressed by the sun's warming rays and reflected them back, giving the impression the lake was displaying a sense of gratitude. Countless birch trees, ash trees and black alders gathered in small groups like folk attending a local festivity. This unique blend of scenery reached deep into his marrow. As we already know, Tim was fond of scenic places, and this one surpassed anything he had seen before. Perceptive and astonished, he wandered through the landscape, noticing even the flowers and plants appeared more beautiful than those in his waking world. The intensity of colour and bright illumination ensnared his senses. In the distance, a magnificent hall loomed, boasting rustic wood. Steep and sharp elements granted the structure its own rugged, timeless charm.

"*Bloody hell, that slaps, I wish I could live here*," he uttered. But there was another, subtler component that piqued his curiosity. Tim quickly realised that this was indeed a dream. Usually, if such a realisation struck him, he could turn it into a lucid dream. Lucid dreaming allows one to shape circumstances and outcomes within a dreamscape. To Tim's disappointment, however, he found himself plainly unable to do so, and a surge of curiosity swept through his core. *"Wait a minute, why does it feel like I have to follow through a predetermined script?"* His internal compass urged Tim to explore further until he stumbled across a medieval well, yet it seemed untouched by time.

Distracted by the structure, Tim didn't notice the mysterious woman behind him until she tapped him on the shoulder. A swift shiver cascaded down his spine, as all his attention had been fixed upon the old well, standing there like a shadow of the past. With the first words spoken by his eerily mythical opposite, Tim's chill faded, for her voice sounded both calming and protective. *"Hello, dear Tim, I'd like to have a word or two with you."* He turned around to see a tall woman standing before him. Her appearance was both glamorous and graceful, she wore a white dress adorned with golden ornaments. Around her neck hung a remarkable piece of jewellery, almost ostentatious. It was rare for a woman to tower over him, yet she did. Her rich red hair fell in silken strands. Her overall demeanour was motherly and caring, yet also formidable. *"Sure, but first, I'd like to know how you know my name*," Tim asked. The woman brushed her voluminous red hair aside and smiled warmly. *"I know you for a very long time, Tim. If you'd like to put a name to my face, just call me Vanadis."* Tim nodded, deciding not to press for more answers, as he was more intrigued by what she had to say. *"Understood, I'll refer to you as Vanadis. What would you like to discuss or inform me about?"* The otherworldly lady drew a wand from beneath her dress, pointed it at the ground, and a cosy red armchair appeared beside Tim. She repeated the action, summoning one for herself. The two took seats in the comfortable furniture. Tim's heart thrummed with anticipation. "*It's about your future, Tim. All those odd incidents you experienced yesterday were meant as little signs to loosen you up from your regular everyday life. I hope they didn't scare you too much."* Tim settled into the plush armchair, listening intently to her words.

Another shiver rushed through him as memories of those peculiar encounters resurfaced. "*Well, to be honest, they did scare me. They just came out of the blue, and I didn't know how to react or what to make of them. But if they were intended as signs, then I'd ask you to enlighten me further."* Vanadis' eyes widened with delight, pleased by Tim's response. *"You're cooperative, that's a good start. The first thing I'd like to tell you is that much of what you've heard in fairy tales and sagas is real. I'm talking about land spirits, magical animals, witchcraft, ghosts and certain objects that possess their own essence."* Tim frowned, suspicion evident in his eyes. Vanadis anticipated this reaction and continued, *"It's not that those creatures and phenomenon's are visible to everyone. Fantastical beings tend to hide in unsettled and abandoned places, far from society. Wizards and witches practise in secret orders, careful not to get caught, and supernatural forces are neither visible nor approachable to most people."* Tim Meyer's mind overflowed with questions. He had to decide which ones were worth asking, as the dream wouldn't last forever. So, he chose the one most relevant to him. "*Okay, I understand. But what qualifies me to be part of all this? I assume you aren't telling me this without a deeper purpose."*

The mysterious lady snapped her fingers. *"Bingo, you're onto something. I've been watching you for quite a while. From what I can tell, you are kind and caring to your friends, open to new things even if you wouldn't admit it. You have a big heart, a lot of power, and you're destined for something of utmost significance. Everyone has their destiny, nobody can escape it. You, Tim Meyer, won't be an exception. A lot will change very soon. But be careful about what you reveal to your friends and family."* Tim grew slightly more frustrated. All he wanted was concrete information. What did all this mean? What would change for him? It felt as if the impressive, mystical woman was deliberately withholding that information. "*But what's my purpose and my fate*?" he pressed. *"I understand I need to keep it a secret, but if there is a higher calling, then I need more detailed information."* Vanadis only offered him a knowing smirk. *"There is so much to learn and so little time. Let's just say the next few days will be eventful. But first, you need to wake up."*

Tim's body followed Vanadis's command to the letter, as he found himself awake in his bed. The tranquil morning light crept through his curtains, but he ignored it as the prior vision was difficult to fathom with his worldview. Tim's eyes remained fixed on the ceiling. "*Land spirits, ghosts, supernatural creatures, and, in between the lines, me? I still don't get it."* With a frustrated sigh, Tim got out of bed. Throughout his entire morning routine, the latest revelation clung to his mind until he finally made a decision. *"Logic and reason shall prevail! I'm just going to treat this as a mystery that needs solving, and I already have an idea how to do it."* He rummaged through one of his wardrobes where he kept school and office supplies. A bright green, empty poster came into view, a leftover from a previous school presentation. With four thumbtacks, he attached it to the wall. At the top left, he wrote "Me/my life" and drew a circle around it. To the right, he wrote "Magical creatures/witchcraft," also encircled. Tim drew an arrow pointing to the right circle and wrote "Somehow qualifies to interact with/New profession," adding a question mark. He made another arrow, this time pointing back to the "Me/my life" note, accompanied only by a question mark. Beneath the left circle, he listed all the unexplainable incidents that had occurred so far. After a thoughtful hum, he reached a temporary conclusion. *"My new calling seems to be some sort of bridge between the realm of magic and our ordinary world. I also have a strong feeling it has something social about it. Why else would she mention my friends and perceived good heart as qualifications?"*

A persistently ringing doorbell interrupted his contemplative trance. Through the intercom, he asked who it was. A familiar young female voice answered, *"Hey Tim, it's me, Franziska. I thought we could go to the gym together and afterwards run some errands for the upcoming barbecue party."* *"Sure, come in!"* he said, opening the door. Franziska quickly ascended the few steps and entered his room. Franziska was Tim's comfort character, the one he trusted with everything. She was always easy to talk to, friendly and well-mannered, though sometimes a bit quirky and mysterious. Their friendship dated back to the days when young Franziska and Tim played carelessly together in the playground sandbox, two kindred spirits united in juvenile glee.

They shared a light-hearted conversation, but the mood shifted when she noticed the poster. The corners of the witty Franziska's mouth curled into a challenging smirk. Brushing some of her brunette hair from her face, she remarked, "*Are you into witchcraft and magic now? Blimey, I expected anything, but this is a surprise, no joke."* Tim felt he owed her an explanation and told her about the recent events, from the cloud-weaving woman to his dream. Franziska listened intently, not wanting to miss any detail of his story. *"You should keep quiet about this in public, it sounds like you're onto something incredibly intriguing. I could see something like this being discussed on Domian."* She was referring to a popular German radio and TV talk show where callers could share their stories with a sympathetic host. Tim and Franziska had spent time watching this unique piece of national TV entertainment together. *"Okay, Franzi, something tells me you're right to be cautious. Let's keep it a secret from now on. Feel honoured to be one of the 'enlightened'."* The young woman rolled her eyes at the title. From that moment on, Tim Meyer and Franziska Eibe's friendship entered a new stage. A wave of relief washed over him as he found someone to confide in about his now rather extraordinary life.

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The two friends, who had known each other since they were five, wandered through the small town of Kühltal. July boasted all its grandeur and splendour, showing its finest side to the valley's inhabitants, although few were strolling along the streets. Aside from a group of elderly people gathered at the local bakery, there wasn't much activity. Many locals were probably still at work or had already left for their holidays elsewhere. Tim and Franziska were deeply immersed in their own subjects of interest. Their primary topic of conversation was Tim's newfound world of wonders, filled with endless possibilities. Who knew what lay hidden in those unknown realms, aside from witches, and land spirits? Tim's brunette companion seemed oddly accustomed, which stirred his bewilderment. However, the two planned to visit the gym primarily to indulge in sport, rather than chit-chat. Sometimes, in moments of silence, flickers of memory from the incidents the previous day intermittently surfaced in his consciousness. He wondered how his fellow citizens would regard such fantastical concepts.

As soon as the friends finished their workout and closed the big glass door behind them, a thought crossed Franziska's mind. She felt it was time to explain something to Tim. "*Well, there's a reason for my unimpressed attitude towards your recent encounters. It's because I experienced something similar as a young child."* Tim's curiosity piqued, he frowned and asked for more details. *"There's an old majestic oak tree along the dirt road between the cookout spot at the creek and the row of houses above the old middle school. My parents, brother and I went hiking. I had a disagreement with my brother, which upset me. I ran off, lost my way and panicked. Crying and distressed, I found myself next to that tree. Suddenly, the air felt more energetic, almost magical. A deep voice reassured me, 'Don't worry, little Franziska, your family will find you soon, and your brother will apologise.' It was so calming and reassuring, and within five minutes, everything happened exactly as the oak had prophesied."* Her story resonated deeply with Tim, aligning with what the mysterious lady in his last dream had told him. *"Dank, have you ever tried to make sense of it?"* Tim asked. "*Often, I thought I was just calming myself down and that my parents finding me minutes later was a coincidence. But it feels deeply mysterious and otherworldly, doesn't it?"* A butterfly flew by, and Tim remarked, "*Well, maybe we'll solve this mystery together soon."* Franziska and Tim nearly forgot about organising food and drinks for the barbecue that evening.

Their daily agenda led them to the nearest grocery store. The village of Kühltal had three supermarkets. One offered the most options but at a higher price, another was always the cheapest but with fewer choices, and a third, near the local gym, was small and old-fashioned yet had a decent balance between price and service. Two of them stood opposite each other, located close to a sparsely frequented train station, the other situated near the local gym. Regardless of the choice a customer made, all three were easily accessible within walking distance. Teetering between external focus and intrinsic contemplation, Franziska and Tim entered the supermarket. Tim Meyer ate almost anything he liked, whereas Franziska was a vegetarian, though she made an exception for seafood. Their shared shopping trolley reflected these preferences.

"*We still need some few beer for us and the others. No German grilling season is complete without a fair share of beer,*" Tim remarked. *"Let's have a variety of drinks as well, not just beer. How about some sparkling water or juice?"* Franziska suggested, advocating for a broader, healthier selection. "*Sure, I'll let you pick while I select the beer,*" Tim agreed, eager to choose the best option.
Intrigued by a brand he had never noticed before, Tim reached out and grabbed a single bottle from the box. *"Never tried this one before. I'll give it a chance."* The label depicted an old wanderer dressed in traditional attire. Compared to other brands' artwork, this particular image seemed slightly more vibrant in colour, its outlines marked by thick black lines. There was something captivating about this bottle. Suddenly, the wanderer on the label raised his glass and winked at him. Barely audible, he whispered to Tim, *"This evening, my friend, you'll be learning a lot."* A cold shiver ran down the young German's spine, and he nearly dropped the bottle. Would this fantastical world of magic finally reveal itself fully to him today? The possibility filled him with nervous anticipation. "*Where do I have to go and at what time?"* he asked the figure, his voice betraying his curiosity. Yet the wanderer remained silent and unanimated. Franziska returned with plenty of water, juice and iced tea. Finally, everything was gathered.

Fully stocked with food and drinks, Tim and Franziska left the supermarket. Dennis, driving his Ford Focus, arrived in the parking area with almost perfect timing, accompanied by Ronald and his girlfriend. The car doors opened almost simultaneously. Tim, Dennis, Martin, Ronald and Franziska had been friends since their teenage years in middle school. Although they occasionally argued, it never seriously threatened the unity of the group. Countless hours of convivial gatherings and shared trust solidified their friendship into a picture-book example of a close-knit social circle. Ronald's relationship with his girlfriend Miriam had begun about three years ago. If you saw one, the other was likely just around the corner. "*We assumed we'd find you shopping here,"* Dennis remarked, giving Tim and Franziska a friendly hug. His dark-brown eyes, dark-blond hair and straight nose formed a trustworthy and welcoming smile.

"If you're ready, we could drive up to the cooking spot," he suggested in his thick Swabian accent. Tim glanced at his friend Franziska with a raised eyebrow. She understood this gesture as his request for final confirmation. "*Yes, let's begin. Yolo, why the heck not?"* The grilling ensemble crammed into the car, filling all five seats. "*Heard anything from Martin yet? He said he'd show up today*," Ronald asked. Tim turned his head towards him. *"He'll join later, he still needs to take a shower first, as usual."* Miriam chuckled. "*That's nothing new. Every time we hang out, he says the same thing. Well, at least he's joining us." "Exactly!"* Franziska said. "*Otherwise, his grandma would have invited him to her birthday again. That woman must either be 500 years old by now or he actually has 500 grandmas."* The car quickly filled with laughter. Martin often used his grandma's birthday as an excuse to avoid plans with his friends, saying, *"It's my grandma's birthday today, let's hang out another time."* Although in hindsight, there was an entirely different reason behind all these hastily forged excuses. The conversation shifted, turning the car into a lively forum for discussion. Dennis's plans to buy his own house, Ronald's return to university and Franziska Eibe's new health habits became the main subjects of their animated chatter. Yet Tim didn't engage much, as the question of *"What would they think if I told them my news? Would they believe me?"* silenced him. Fortunately, his internal conviction that he must maintain secrecy concerning this magical word at all costs helped him seal his lips.

#

After a short drive northwards, the group arrived at their cooking spot. Two low, ridged mountains met there. Between them was a steep and narrow gap. Further upwards, these two ridged mountains reunited into another high plateau. A stream flowed between these mountains, descending to merge with the large river in the valley below. The cooking spot provided an array of benches, a hut and a rather small fireplace. Its humble size didn't deter people from visiting frequently. In fact, this tiny spot, cramped between two mountains, was rarely found devoid of visitors, especially during the warm season. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that it was far from being the only cooking spot nearby. Easy access to water and ample space to park one's car, though propelled it to a favourite for many.

Like a well-coordinated team, Tim Meyer and his friends efficiently prepared everything, with Tim himself starting the fire. As a small flame danced through the crumpled newspaper and ignited the dry branches above, the conversation took an unexpectedly humorous turn. Miriam, in her mellow voice, informed Franziska that she had finally watched the last part of her favourite movie series. *"Franzi, I finally watched the last part of Hollis Gondler, but now that I have, I feel quite empty. I've grown up with those films, nearly alongside the characters. But now that there's nothing left to watch, I have this 'what now' feeling. Do you know what I mean, sis?"* Franziska's voice was filled with understanding and sympathy as she replied, "*Oh my god, I know exactly what you mean. Just thinking about the first part stirs up nostalgia and whimsy in me."* Ronald's facial expression revealed his general annoyance with the topic. *"Look, just because something is older than ten years doesn't automatically make it a masterpiece. And don't even mention the other films, just look at the woman who played Irmgard, she's terrible at acting."* Miriam was about to burst with anger at her beloved boyfriend. Pointing her fork at Ronald like a wand, she retorted furiously, *"Don't you dare talk about her like that! She's a marvellous actress and a great inspiration to me!"* Tim Meyer could only smirk at the irony of it all as he shook his head dismissively.

More to himself than to anyone else, he mumbled, *"Hollis Gondler… They've not yet sensed the faintest hint of what's really out there, waiting to be explored. But who am I to talk, I've barely scratched the surface. Keep grounded, Tim, just keep grounded."* Tim felt a sudden premonition. A clear but swiftly passing image manifested in his mind. Something told him that Martin would appear within the next minute wearing a blue sweater, almost like a proper hallucination. He was eager to test his instincts. If it happened as he felt it would, it would prove his power. The distant shape of a male wearing a baseball cap slowly approached the grilling assembly. Victory and astonishment rushed through Tim's veins as Martin appeared, indeed wearing a blue sweater. *"Lit! Tim Meyer, you're epic,"* he thought.

Chapter three – a new exceptional acquaintance

Martin approached the group, calm and self-assured. *"Yo, I finally made it. Ha-ha. I wasn't sure what I could contribute, so I decided to bring some fish along."* He opened his backpack and pulled out several large trout. "*Holy cow, that's a surprise!"* Miriam exclaimed, eyes and mouth wide open. Ronald tapped Martin appreciatively on the shoulder. "*You got creative there! Did you remove the scales beforehand?"* "*Dude, they do that for you at the trout farm*," Martin replied confidently in his gravelly voice. Meanwhile, Tim Meyer was focused on something entirely different, as he felt an inexplicable urge taking control of his mind. One might call it an 'internal compass' or simply intuition. Regardless of the label given, it mentally dragged Tim onto a path very familiar to him. He needed an excuse for leaving early, his friends must not become suspicious. But what sort of excuse could release him from the occasion without suspicion? Perhaps Franziska could provide some assistance. He walked over to her and whispered*, "Can we talk for a second?"* Franziska raised her eyebrows in mild suspicion, one eye half-closed. *"Sure, let's walk a few metres."*

#

They crossed the bridge and reached a quiet playground on the other side of the stream. Due to the late hour, not a single child was playing there. Perched slightly higher, hidden behind loosely scattered, man-high hazelnut bushes, the spot provided a good vantage point, shielding them from prying eyes while still allowing an adequate overview. Franziska took a deep breath and asked, *"Well, what is it?"* Tim placed his hand on her right arm, trying to gain her full attention. His insistent expression hinted at the urgency of his upcoming inquiry. *"To be frank, the evening is getting wilder and wilder. First, I foresaw the exact timing of Martin's arrival. Equally baffling, I also knew he'd be wearing a blue sweater."* Despite his own giddy bewilderment, he tried his best to keep his voice at a minimum volume. *"Now I feel a sudden urge to strut homewards along the Nachdenkweg. Can you think of an excuse smooth enough to not raise suspicion?"*

A contemplative frown played across her face, and pensively she bit her index finger, pressing her mind to conjure something coherent. In a jiffy, Franziska snapped her fingers, boasting a sly smirk. *"Let's just tell them that you're growing tired and want to walk homewards because you want to take in some of this summer night's atmosphere. Just for the good weather's sake, of course."* Tim showed his gratitude with a boyish grin. *"Sometimes the best solutions are the easiest, yet they always seem to be last in line. You're brilliant Franziska, let's go back to the others." "Wait…"* the witty brunet interrupted him insistently. Some owls hooted remotely, filling the moment of uncommented mutual staring. *"Anything wrong?"* Tim finally asked her, expecting her to mention a looming problem. *"Nothing earth-shattering. Just that maybe I can't make it to the upcoming river light festival, something family related*." Another handful of seconds passed, punctuated by a second owl hoot. Tim nodded light-heartedly. "*Oh well, understandable, hope you can still come though."* The two sauntered back to the grilling ensemble.

Back at the fireplace, Tim noticed Martin carefully placing the fish onto sticks he had prepared earlier. *"Not bad, I have to say I'm impressed,*" he remarked. *"The chef appreciates it,"* Martin replied. However, there was an issue troubling the group that Tim decided to bring up. "*Why don't we see you outside much these days? If you want to talk about it, I'm listening."* Martin carefully considered his words as there was a secret requiring proper seclusion. *"Sometimes I just feel tired and down. I can't quite pinpoint why. It's like a dull, empty feeling. But don't worry, I'm sure it'll get better."* Tim nodded. "*I hope so too. Often, just one day can change everything,"* he said, reflecting on his own recent experiences. Soon after, Tim Meyer mixed some drinks that Ronald had provided. He called them "drink combinations," a term he'd picked up from a YouTuber named Anaconda Duke. Duke was notorious for his questionable health habits, which worried many of his viewers. Tim found Duke's content somewhat entertaining, as he had a particular interest in unconventional people. However, inspired by Franziska, he ensured to moderate his drinking. This new mindset required a clear head, any lapse could compromise the necessary secrecy. The barbecue party continued in a calm atmosphere, with camaraderie among friends creating a homely feeling around the fireplace.

The unnecessary but fierce argument between Miriam and her boyfriend seemed to have already faded into the mist of the past. She leaned her head against Ronald's, her straight red hair mingling with his shoulder length, bright brown. Tim was startled after checking the time on his phone. It was almost midnight, and he wanted nothing more than to uncover the secret behind his intuition's guidance. Luckily, he'd already informed his friends of his departure and bid farewell to the group. He was finally ready to explore the reason behind this sudden craving. Their distant *"See you later Tim"* faded away with every step he took.

#

Tim Meyer crossed the little bridge and passed the playground. Despite the prevailing darkness, his surroundings weren't scary or unsettling, not even slightly. Endless stars decorated the night sky, glimmering in vibrant silver scarlet. A full moon illuminated his path better and more charmingly than any dim streetlight ever could. Just like the previous night, the crickets performed their nightly concert of melodic chirping. A gentle breeze brushed against the uncut grass of the fields bordering Kühltal. Tim was very familiar with this route, he called it the "Nachdenkweg," which translates to "Pondering Path." He had named it so because he often walked here while contemplating life during times of change or difficulty. The path began at the northern outskirts of Kühltal, where the last row of houses stood, stretched between the forest edge and the fields below, and ended at the cooking spot. The moonlit fields and grass dancing in the gentle breeze created a picturesque scene that brought a contented smile to Tim's lips. *"What a beautiful world*," he whispered. Energised by this view, he continued homeward until he spotted an inviting bench beneath a massive old oak tree. As if the night hadn't already been magical enough, a wide beam of moonlight illuminated the ancient oak and the bench before it. Rays of light filtered through the leaves, casting dappled patterns upon the grass below. His overly active intuition insisted that he stop precisely there. The impressive size of the tree indicated that it must be several centuries old.

Perhaps some regional magical order of those Vanadis had mentioned, met here to cast one spell or another. Tim was taken aback when he realised that this must be the mysterious oak tree that had aided Franziska when she was a young, disoriented child. Just a few seconds later, with the subtlety of a marching band, the old oak began to creak. A deep, ancient voice made Meyer gasp. It was a sound of brief startlement rather than shock, as his instincts subconsciously told him that something extraordinary was about to happen. *"I'm glad you've made it to our appointment, Meyer. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Audun, a spirit that has inhabited this marvellous old tree for centuries. Sometimes I help people in need whom I perceive as deserving, but this time I'm here to provide you with further instructions, Tim Meyer."* The young German was about to reach out his hand to greet the land spirit but quickly pulled it back, realising that this gesture might be inappropriate. Instead, Tim gave a friendly nod. *"I've heard about an old oak nearby who helped a friend of mine when she was little. Glad to meet you, Audun. I'm eager to hear more about this new calling of mine Vanadis informed me about."* He wanted to make himself more comfortable, but the bench was facing away from the tree, so he sat down cross-legged instead.

"A realm of magic intertwined with society but hidden from most people's view is not easy to fathom in a single encounter. That's why you are contacted by us spirits multiple times. About the job," Audun continued, *"You, Tim Meyer, are meant to be a witch's Paladin. That's your calling."* Tim frowned slightly. The only thing his mind could associate with the word Paladin was a unit in a medieval strategy game he once played. *"I don't know what the task of a witch's Paladin is. I need more insight, Audun. Please elaborate."* The ancient wood of the old oak creaked once more. "*Witchcraft and magic are accessible to only a few. Their basic function relies on the practitioner's energy with which they shape their surroundings. As you can imagine, excessive use can be very draining. A witch's Paladin is someone who, in modern terms, acts as both a coach and a manager. You help her focus on her craft, motivate her when she's exhausted or demotivated, and guide and protect her whenever necessary."*

Tim Meyer grew more sceptical by each passing second. Even if his recent experiences made the first fence between his insecurities and life's challenges crumble, there was still a large wall built with strict routine and avoidance of trouble containing him. Alongside this, he also didn't want to abandon the slow yet steadily growing online shop he ran with Bedirhan just to become some witch's servant. Already, he felt no option but to respectfully decline. "*I understand, but I already have plans with a friend. Besides, I have an aversion to being someone's servant."* Tim stood up ready to bid farewell in goodwill when the mythical voice interrupted him loudly. "*Wait, the weight of responsibility for the world's continued existence can't be so easily shrugged off." "The bloody what?"* Tim exclaimed, his eyes wide as a solemn shiver ran through every vessel. Somewhere deep within lingered an internal understanding confirming the spirit's message, regardless of whether he fully accepted it yet. "*Oh, don't think too much about it for now,"* Audun interjected abruptly, cutting off any further explanation. "*You won't be a servant. Think of it as a business partnership. You'll work as a team, each relying on the other. Your payment will be generous, and the secret districts' administration will ensure you're well compensated."*

The hint from the old oak about potentially having to save the world from an unknown threat made him nervous, but he trusted Audun's advice to take things slowly. *"Do you mean the government?"* he asked curiously. The spirit laughed heartily. "*All around the world, magical folk and their accomplices have formed secret societies and orders. They did it so cleverly that, to this day, the unenlightened still don't know about it or see them merely as ordinary clubs. These orders sustain themselves by leasing land, manufacturing goods and selling them. They've even infiltrated tax offices and created shell bureaus to keep entire states oblivious."* Tim listened carefully, intrigued by the idea of an entire society managing to fool the rest of the world for centuries. *"I see. So, I'd officially be self-employed as a coach without getting into trouble while secretly being part of a hidden society. That sounds cool, to say the least."* Perhaps the wondrous weight of it all, combined with this influx of new information, momentarily lifted his ingrained aversion to risk. Relieved by Tim's interest, Audun's voice became more optimistic and light-hearted.

“Her name is Sharon Waterfield, and she recently moved from Edinburgh to your village. Vanadis has sent her a series of dreams and urges to move to this specific valley, nestled within the Black Forest, much like the craving that brought you to me.” A thoughtful expression crossed Tim’s face. He was determined not to mess up his first task as a Witches' Paladin. His fear of failure didn't miss an opportunity to bother him. *"How should I approach her, and how will I recognise her?"* The old oak eagerly provided more details. *"Wear a bright business shirt, any shade of white or beige will do, as well as dark trousers. We need to recreate a dream Vanadis has given her repeatedly. As always, the River Light Festival will take place in Forstquelle. Do you remember the stage in the spa park?" "Yes, I do,"* Tim replied deeply invested. *"The one that borders the river, right?" "Exactly ! When you enter the festival, you'll notice a new food stall nearby, run by a person of colour. Looks like Michael Jackson in his twenties. He’ll have a big palm tree as decoration, you can't miss him."*

Tim Meyer pointed his index finger at Audun, anticipation in his voice. "*Let me guess, he’s also a member of this secret society, there to provide further insight at the meeting point."* For the third time, the land spirit creaked. *"You're getting the hang of it. The girl will be right next to him, with chestnut brown hair and some freckles."* Tim took out his phone and quickly jotted down some notes. *"Got it, amigo. I'll also inform Franziska, she’ll cover for me just as she did this evening."* Audun sighed. *"What's wrong?"* Tim asked. *"You'll need to be very careful about revealing too much information. Let's just say this meeting is of great significance, the last thing we need is hostile eyes preying on you. Just attend the festival, make contact with Sharon, and take her away from the centre of attention. Focus on recreating her recurring dream. As long as you keep to the dress code, there should be no risk worth mentioning."* In baby steps, Tim Meyer was beginning to see his new job not as a burden, but as an invigorating new part of his life. Even the magical society seemed to follow some pattern, offering structure amidst its arcane character.

"*As I told you earlier, our community consists of various orders, clubs and secret societies. You, Tim, are part of the Task Force Fir, or TFF for short. That's all I can tell you for now. Expect your first payment in the next few days. I wish you the best of luck, it should be easy for you."* The young German looked up at the old oak tree. *"I understand. Thank you very much. See you another time."* His now numb legs initially hindered him from standing, but he quickly regained his footing and bid farewell to Audun. Meyer pulled his phone from his pocket. *"Okay, it's not even that late, and I'm now much more knowledgeable. I suppose it's best to head homewards now."*

Taking one step at a time, he continued walking along the familiar path at the edge of the forest. Shortly after, the first row of houses came into view. Many lights were already extinguished, but some still shone with a welcoming glow like bastions amidst the darkness. To his right lay the main part of Kühltal, the settlement stretched as far as the narrow valley allowed. This allegory conjured by the landscape strongly reminded him of his own situation. Did he even have a choice, after all, a say in his personal story? More and more questions roamed freely in Tim's mind. *"I hope the witch will be easy to work with, and I wonder how much the task force will pay me. Will she get paid as well?"* He had already forgotten Audun's words about being at least partly responsible for the world's continued existence. Perhaps it was too much for his brain to process at the moment. The task at hand demanded a lot of attention and care. *"How will I explain this new girl to my friends and parents? Maybe as a subtenant? I'm not entirely sure, well, nothing more than a first world problem."* Lost in his thoughts, he suddenly realised his old middle school lay just below the hillside, separated from him by an old, rusty olive-green iron railing, a grassy field and a neglected garden. His older brother's class had put a lot of effort into constructing the garden, but later years had not continued the project. It fell into neglect, a forgotten reminiscence of the 1990s. However, the slight overgrowth still allowed a glimpse of the schoolyard.

Two basketball hoops faced each other, somewhat out of place with the building's style though they didn't disturb the overall image. A reminder to the eye of how each generation inevitably leaves its own personal mark upon a place of shared history. A foreign observer might categorise the building's style as 'Victorian era', while Germans refer to this period as 'Gründerzeit'. Tim involuntarily giggled as he recalled an incident when a pipe in the school's heating system had collapsed, resulting in two days off for all classes. Compared to his current circumstances, his teenage years seemed rather uneventful. Tim decided to question the entire scenario from scratch. *"Maybe it's all part of a dream, one of those where you think you've already woken up but are still dreaming,"* he thought. Pinching the skin on his right hand between his index finger and thumb, he mused, *"Okay, it seems like I'm indeed awake. I have another idea."* Tim took out his phone again and browsed the internet, scanning for anything odd, anything that wouldn't make sense outside a dream. He couldn't find anything peculiar. *"Okay, this is actually real. A Witch's Paladin."* Tim grinned and shook his head. "*Why not call it witch maker, magical coach, or something similar? Now I feel like a video game character."* What his senses couldn't detect was the mysterious person following him, hiding in the darkness of an empty carport just behind.

#

Tim chose to continue on his way home, which meant walking along the road. On both sides, single rows of family homes stood, some old and almost leaning against each other like ageing companions, while others stood more freely, surrounded by gardens. In the old part of the town centre, ancient buildings and small shops prevailed, each estate carrying its own rugged charm in essence. A narrow cobblestone road led to the main thoroughfare, which at this late hour was easy to cross. Shady bars and kebab shops provided dim, flickering neon lights, and like the streets, they were sparsely frequented. The young German didn't expect anyone to be following him, but when he heard footsteps, he turned around. A barely noticeable female figure disappeared into an old, damp alley. Tim didn't bother to look closer, that was probably just a woman on her way home, much like himself. *"Mmmh,"* he hummed, raising his right eyebrow. *"Probably nothing significant."*

Carried away by his thoughts, Tim tried humming a rap. *"Mm...mm...mm, Puerto Rican, or Haitian,"* he murmured before giving up. *"I bloody don't know the lyrics."* Only a bridge and a few hundred yards separated him from home, unaware that his pursuer had once again caught up to him. Dressed casually with her hair tied back in a ponytail, she swiftly drew a wand from her sleeve. *"Now I have you exactly where I want you,"* she whispered, though Tim was too far away to hear. An evil grin spread across her dimly lit face as she pointed her wand at Tim Meyer, ready to cast a spell. To his remarkable fortune, two local lads, eager to properly learn how to flirt with women, mistook the witch for an unassuming lady. Their actions unknowingly saved more than they could have ever imagined. *"Hey, I just wanted to come over and tell you that you're really cute. What's your name?"* the young local interrupted, attempting to practise his pick-up lines. A rosy blush spread across the woman's face. *"Oh, I'm actually..."* She glanced over and realised that Tim had disappeared into the distance. *"You fool!"* Filled with anger and frustration, she turned her wrath upon the innocent young man. *"Mit der kraft Isaz frerst thu."* From his hairline down to his feet, he froze and fell stiffly to the ground. His friend witnessed the incident and reacted quickly. The witch pointed her wand again and grinned, but unlike his unfortunate friend, he was quicker than her spellcasting, shoving her off the bridge into the river. "*May the river's water make you wet,"* he scoffed poetically before rushing to aid his frozen friend.

Meanwhile, Tim Meyer reached home unfazed by the escalation happening so close by. His father, Klaus, and mother, Alma, were still awake, and he seized the opportunity to proudly present them with his grades, enjoying a moment of normality during this adventurous and daring period of his life. Finally, all was well, and Tim was safe. Instead of capturing Tim, his malicious pursuer found herself soaked in cold water. Before slipping into sleep, his memory replayed everything that had happened. The thought that the next seven days might be the last ordinary ones of his life filled him with unwanted thrill and uncertainty, robbing him of some rest. "*Why me? I'm probably the worst choice anyone could make for this job,"* he scoffed before gently drifting into sleep.

Chapter four – The River light festival

This last mundane week of his life ended rather uneventfully. Tim found himself largely unoccupied, a circumstance that allowed him to mentally prepare for the upcoming changes. As the school year concluded, so did the practical part of his apprenticeship, which he completed at a small, family-run construction company. An entirely different pair of shoes was the business venture he planned to pursue alongside his friend Bedirhan. He was responsible for managing his and Bedirhan Alemdar's online shop, a task requiring careful attention. Tim was uncertain whether he still had enough time for their venture or if his new role as a witch's Paladin would demand all his focus. Another concern was how to explain this to his friend Bedirhan. He simply couldn't bear to lie to his friend. Tim Meyer may have been many things, but among them was certainly not a chronic liar. Constantly beating around the bushes and contriving one excuse after another struck him as an incredibly tedious and dishonourable way to live life. As if this weren't complicated enough, Tim also had to figure out how to explain this new lifestyle to his parents. Should he try to convince them that the online shop was doing well enough to support him alone? This period was full of questions urgently needing answers.

It was Sunday again, the day Tim Meyer always reserved for his business accounting. He preferred this day because it allowed him to work slowly and carefully, without interruption. By around noon, he had finished. Tim took a deep breath after closing his accounting software. His attention then shifted to the window beside his desk. Kühltal's sky was darkened by clouds, and soft raindrops dribbled against the glass. The weather report had announced rain until at least next Friday, the day the river lights festival was supposed to take place. "*This could ruin all the planning, it has to stop,"* Tim muttered, his voice tinged with concern. A subtle sense of responsibility began to form in the back of his mind, a good sign for his new career, unlike the raindrops outside. The valley had transformed into a watery, cloudy waiting room.

With a slick movement, Tim opened the door to his balcony. The overhanging roof was intended to protect against rain, allowing for relaxing outside while staying dry. In practice, it was different, as the rain often fell diagonally. Tim gazed into the distance at Kühltal, a small town in the Black Forest, shrouded in clouds, rain and thick fog. Raindrops gently washed over his face as he pondered whether there was something useful to do. An idea had been crossing his mind. A plausible reason for him to spend time with a new woman could be to allow her to move in as a subtenant. This would not only help form a strong bond with her but also give a neglected part of his flat a new purpose. He took a few steps back inside, moving through his room into the living room. It was a shame how he had neglected it. A leather couch with a low table in front of it, a bookshelf and a large flat-screen television, which he hadn't even turned on once, were the only items in the room. *"Well, the room itself seems spacious enough,"* he thought. He then turned his attention to the small corridor connecting each room to the others. "*If I install a door here, she'll be able to close her room for proper privacy."* His friend Dennis Stamm was quite handy with crafting, and Tim knew he had announced taking the next week off. Perhaps Dennis could help him. *"I could use today to inform my parents in advance, it would make it all look more believable,"* he decided after some thought. *"Yes, I'm going to do that."*

Tim left his floor and took the few steps down the staircase to his parents on the ground floor. His mother, Alma, was busy with some gardening, seemingly unfazed by the persistent rain. His father, Klaus, was boiling coffee. Tim discussed the idea of a potential subtenant with them. At first, Mr Meyer Senior seemed sceptical, but with solid arguments and determination, Tim managed to change his mind. "*Alright Kiddo, you've convinced me. But if the subtenant breaks something, you'll be responsible for repairs. Nevertheless, good luck landlord,"* his father quipped. Meyer Junior nodded vigorously. *"Makes sense, I understand that."* After completing this first step, it was time to contact Dennis. With a few quick steps up the staircase, Tim found himself back in his apartment.

He sat down on his rarely used living room couch, picked up his phone and opened the chat with Dennis. The explanation about seeing his unused living room as dead capital and thus planning to install a door there for a potential subtenant didn't raise any suspicion. His offer to treat Dennis to a well-known Chinese restaurant in return for helping install the door found fertile ground. After all, Dennis had a solid reputation for helping his friends. With everything settled, Tim Meyer leaned back comfortably in his cosy desk chair, ready to watch some videos to refresh his mind. However, a sudden interruption startled him, appearing as a short video. As if it weren't odd enough that the images started flickering without a deliberate click of his mouse, a breathtaking young woman appeared, her graceful presence complemented by a whimsical romantic tune. The visual was brief and impromptu yet impactful enough to make his heart flutter. Tim searched for this little piece of media in his browsing history but found nothing. Once again, the young ambassador between the worlds was left without answers.

So far everything had gone according to plan. By the next afternoon, the door had been chosen, purchased and properly installed, and Dennis was treated to the promised Asian food. For Dennis, the door was simply a gateway to another room. For Tim Meyer, it symbolised the first step into something new. Dennis Stamm leaned against the living room wall, staring into the muggy distance. *"Let's hope the river lights festival doesn't get washed out. The forecast predicts rain until Friday."* Tim Meyer shared his friend's concern, but for reasons Dennis knew nothing about. *"We might need a little miracle,"* he mused. Dennis's eyes met Tim's again. *"For some reason, I really feel like going there."* Tim shrugged nonchalantly, attempting to appear relaxed. However, the recent images of the charming lass from the previous day still tormented him. *"Did it ever happen to you that a video just disappeared from your search history?"* Tim asked. The sincerity of his question wasn't lost on Dennis, although he assumed it to be in a more mundane context. *"That usually happens if someone removes it. Mostly because it's against some guidelines or because the content creator wasn't satisfied with their work."* Tim Meyer nodded along, though he had developed a knack for distinguishing an ordinary occurrence from a genuine vision.

Over the next four days, Tim immersed himself in learning about witchcraft and other supernatural concepts. While most people might consider these topics distant and fantastical, a far cry of ancient beliefs, to Tim, they were simply part of his new profession. However, he found many sources contradictory, leading him to realise that much of his learning might have to be practical.

Friday finally arrived with an unpromising morning, as the valley remained shrouded in thick fog. His nervous hope for good weather stemmed from his strict adherence to the plan Audun had provided him with. It was vital that the occasion attract Sharon to the meeting place, otherwise, all the dreams Vanadis had sent her would be in vain. Everything felt like a fragile gamble. Yet, around 2 pm, powerful rays of the summer sun broke through the cloud cover. Tim and his friends planned to meet at the river light festival in groups. Bedirhan, Ekaterina, Ronald, and Miriam arrived slightly earlier than Tim, Dennis, and Martin. This time, Tim Meyer was responsible for transportation in his BMW coupé.

#

Kühltal had two neighbouring towns. One of them, a few miles north of the outdoor cooking spot and even more minuscule than Kühltal itself, was called Hof. The only two aspects of this settlement one could consider vibrant were the main thoroughfare and a supermarket. South of Tim's hometown laid Forstquelle. Back in the middle Ages, a local nobleman had sighted a boar washing its wounds in a spring. Upon closer inspection, he realised the animal knew exactly what it was doing. Forstquelle's springs held healing properties. With this discovery, the town's destiny to steadily grow into a renowned spa destination was set. Near the spa park, they found a large, unoccupied space perfect for parking the BMW. As the three friends got out of the coupé, Dennis remarked, *"I can hear the music from here."* Tim nodded, and Martin added, *"I hope it's not too crowded. Well, let's find out."* The trio was dressed in the most diverse manner imaginable. Tim, following advice from the land-spirit Audun, wore a white business shirt and dark trousers. Dennis Stamm sported a leather jacket and jeans, while Martin opted for a red hoodie, his white shutter shades, and shorts.

A winding paved path led into the park, and other festival-goers were also making their way to the event. The only thing bothering him was the uncertainty of Franziska's arrival. Like a human wave, people continued to flood into the spa park. To the left, a hillside field of neatly trimmed grass bordered a modern hall perched on the slope, where events and concerts were sometimes held. To the right, a small but beautifully decorated theatre stood, with a row of palm trees planted in front of it. The massive plant pots made one wonder if there was anyone in the world capable of lifting them. As the trio meandered through the crowd, Tim noticed the owner of a well-known local skiing hut. The middle-aged man, dressed in a checked shirt, seemed deep in conversation with his boyfriend, who, coincidentally or not, was dressed in the same style. Tim, uninvolved in Forstquelle's winter sports scene, only vaguely recognised these people and didn't know their names. However, their conversation strangely intersected with his world. *"Have you heard about what happened last evening in Kühltal?"* the skiing hut owner asked his partner. *"Are you joking? It's spreading like wildfire. A young lad claimed his friend was frozen like a fish stick in a freezer. He said a witch cast a spell on him."* As one of the food stall waiters handed him a big slice of pizza, he continued, "*Only God knows what youngsters these days are consuming. A few more mushrooms and he'd be flying on a broom himself!"* His partner let out a small chuckle. Unbeknownst to Tim, he was the target of this kidnapping attempt. His mission to join the task force alongside Sharon Waterfield hadn't gone unnoticed by a malicious order of dark magic. All he knew was his current objective.

Tim needed a way to discreetly detach from Dennis and Martin and find his contact. *"I wish I could open up to my friends about this,"* he thought. *"It would make everything so much easier. Now I have to avoid them and probably even lie."* Frustration and the burden of carrying this secret weighed heavily on Tim. Not far away, he spotted Natalia, Martin Fink's cousin, a short yet very talkative person. Her hair held a dark hue of brown that one could easily mistake for black. Wherever there had been a festivity, so was Natalia. Perhaps her extroverted nature could cause enough of a distraction.

Tim and his two companions moved through the crowd almost wordlessly, searching for a good spot to hang out. The animated chatter around them was deafening. Tim quickened his pace to take the lead, guiding his friends straight into Natalia's line of sight. Natalia, standing next to her far more laid-back boyfriend, noticed Martin and waved enthusiastically to invite him over. *"Just one more step, and I'm good for the meetup,"* Tim Meyer thought. He, Martin, and Dennis approached Natalia, greeting her with a friendly, *"Hey, hi, hello."* Martin's cousin responded with a *"Hey,"* followed by a surprised remark. *"Martin, that's lit, it's really good to see you out and about again."* She glanced at Dennis, suspicion evident on her face. *"You had to force him, didn't you?"* But Martin spoke up for himself. *"No, I'm here because I wanted to be. Sometimes people need a bit of solitude, other times it's nice to have company."* Tim, sensing this could lead to a deeper discussion and distraction, said, *"I'm getting a drink,"* and headed to the new food stall. He felt a huge weight being lifted from his shoulders, finally one step further along the thousands he still had to walk.

Evening replaced late afternoon, and hundreds of tea lights, lamps, and fairy lights began to glow. If he hadn't been preoccupied with an important task, Tim would have taken it all in and enjoyed the atmosphere. A few more steps brought him closer to the stage, where a band was tuning their instruments, and the meeting point came into view. It was a food stall, decorated with a large plastic palm tree and a short, bearded early Michael Jackson lookalike. *"That's it!"* he mumbled as he approached. The owner, a man in his thirties with a small beard and short hair, was about Tim's height, maybe a tad shorter. Tim simply pretended to be a regular customer about to order something. But instead of asking for a beer, he leaned in and whispered, *"Tim Meyer, TFF, here for the witch."* The owner extended his hand in greeting. *"Lopt Slygod, TFF as well."* They shared a firm handshake. "*What about Sharon? Shouldn't she be here as well?"* Lopt sighed worriedly and adjusted his shirt. *"I hoped you've already seen and approached her beforehand. She hasn't shown up yet."* Tim shook his head dismissively. *"No, I was strictly following Audun's instructions, didn't want to mess up my first task right away."*

With trembling hands, Slygod opened the stall's side door. *"There is something we can do."* Behind the wooden structure, a small storage tent extended into the back. *"Let's contact the raven,"* he said, picking up his phone. *"A raven? Are you for real?"* Tim asked curiously. *"One of the kind able to speak. Back in the day, we wizards and witches had to wait for them to return to communicate. Today, you attach a little talking device with a belt around their claw and reach out while they're in the air."* His words caught Tim's full attention. *"The magical society evidently optimises itself by applying modern technology? That's remarkable!"* Tim said. Music played by the band nearby filled the air, providing good cover for assessing the situation. *"Tower to sky eye, tower to sky eye. Where the heck is codename* Irmgard*?"* Two seconds of silence, which felt like minutes, followed. *"Irmgard?"* Tim repeated, barely audible. His eyes widened as snippets from the short video resurfaced. The girl who appeared there bore a noticeable resemblance to this Hollis Gondler character. That was the last piece in the puzzle. The vision must have depicted Sharon Waterfield. *"Sky eye to tower. Bandits captured her. They have her in their car, a white van. I've got their licence plate. An upcoming traffic control could interrupt them. Now it depends on whether the bandits engage in a fight or not. Either way, it'll cost them time, which is good for us. Come to the spa park's south end ASAP. Over and out."* With eyes filled with determination, Lopt glanced at Tim. *"You heard it, we mustn't waste another minute."* Tim nodded. *"Got it. I know a path that runs alongside the festival. This way, we'll avoid getting stuck in the crowd." "Great,"* Slygod replied. *"Lead the way."*

#

Familiar with almost every corner of Forstquelle's spa park, Tim Meyer guided Slygod onto an evidently overgrown path, one that the town's administration seemed to have abandoned. Vegetation had partly broken through the asphalt, creating a cracked pattern. To the left, an array of disorganised trees resembled a forest more than a park. To the right, some boulders extended downwards into the rocky terrain. "*There's more to this story, isn't there? I want answers here and now,"* he said assertively to Lopt, palpably bothered by the lack of insight given to him.

“We have enemies, an old, malicious war band of other magicians. To put it simply, they follow a giant who once ravaged and plundered everything he could get his hands on. Then something happened that people these days would call ‘instant karma’. As if some invisible force had punished him, he could no longer stand sunlight. It hurt him as it would a vampire, so he retreated into a cave. Now, he desires nothing less than world domination. As sunlight fades forever, he will be rising from his cave again, and those unaccustomed to mythical creatures might end up praising him as some sort of god. It is not an everyday occurrence to see a giant emerging from a cave." Tim’s unease was clearly evident after hearing these foreboding words. *"Definitely not a first world problem! I reckon this would shatter most people's understanding of reality. How does he plan to stop sunlight from reaching Earth?"* he asked. *"Somewhere underground, hidden from society, there is a relic, some kind of pillar. It's believed to be a sunlight resonance body."* Tim felt even more confused than before. *"But a resonance body is usually a hollow space that enhances frequencies, isn't it?"* Slygod nodded. *"Usually, yes. And this pillar does it with sunlight. Without it, we would have an endless eclipse. It would be bright enough to see, but that’s about it, no blue sky any longer, coldness, plants barely able to grow*." Tim finally grasped how significant their mission obviously was, but who was he to be trusted with something as important as saving an entire planet’s ecosystem? "*That would be the end of the world as we know it. So, what’s the role of me, you, and Sharon?"* he inquired, his voice breathy and shaky.

A brisk walk took them to the southern, more tranquil end of the park in less than five minutes. *"There is an old prophecy, a message that appeared in the dreams of the most important figures in magical society, all on the same night. Not much is clear, but what is certain is that a young witch cast an elaborate protective spell on this mysterious pillar, which thwarted the evil giant's plans. After that scene, dates appeared alongside a family name. It matches Sharon perfectly. As for me, I am one of the best shape shifters of our time, a skill that will undoubtedly prove useful in the right situation."* Only a small wooden bridge, reinforced by metal strings, separated Lopt and Tim from the street. Mere seconds later, Lopt’s phone vibrated. It was the raven again.

"Sky Eye to Tower. The officers were overwhelmed and captured by bandits. If you're the two on the right next to the river, freeze or shock those masked guys at the parking lot. Apparently, they're changing vehicles. Over and out." Paying attention and memorising all that information was an immensely arduous task for Tim, as the sheer mass of new insight nearly broke his sense of logic. Audun had already implied a responsibility for the world's continued existence the previous Friday. Back then, Tim had tried to shake it off, but now he was inevitably facing a villain, a giant banished to the inner earth, eager to either destroy a mystical pillar, the very existence of which was hard to comprehend. Noticing Tim's lack of focus, Lopt placed a wand in his hand. *"Those Gawks in front of us kidnapped Sharon. We must stun them."* Tilting his head, he signalled that it was time to close in.

Undetected, step by step, Lopt and Tim crossed the tiny bridge, armed with wands, their eyes fixed on two masked individuals loading a bound girl and two officers into an ordinary blue Volkswagen estate wagon. After crawling through high grass, Tim and his companion managed to sneak behind a boulder. Lopt placed his hand on Tim's shoulder. As one of the veiled wizards picked up his phone, unaware of their presence, Lopt seized the moment to whisper instructions into Tim's ear. *"I know you've never cast a spell before. That's why I'm sharing my field of energy with you. It should work. Point your wand at the guy on the left and say, 'Oh Aiwas zeih der arnebei, birubi sie ihr giwahrnissa.' Just repeat my words if you can't remember them straight away. Imagine them losing consciousness, tends to strengthen the spell."* Tim nodded but then noticed something that might spell trouble. He indicated for Lopt to lower their exposed heads further behind the rock's cover. *"That raven over there, could it be ours?"* Slygod quickly drew his phone to check. *"Tower to Sky Eye, is that you on the treeline?" "Sky Eye to Tower, no, it's not. I can see him. I'm going in to rob his device. As soon as you hear two ravens fighting, attack. Over and out."* Tim Meyer and Lopt Slygod got into position. Yet another act requiring his best efforts loomed in front of him. If there had been any tangible way to turn back time just to relive his mundane life again, he would've taken it in a heartbeat.

Chapter five – Hiding in a Livingroom

With sharp eyes and sheer determination, fully aware that the outcome of this single action could significantly impact the future, the Raven began its dive towards the opposing order's bird. Luck seemed to be on their side once again as the annual midnight fireworks were launched at the river light festival, posing a loud distraction. Codename Sky Eye pushed his adversary from the branch where he was perched, who' been watching the fireworks unfold. Surprised by this unexpected ambush, the opponent had to stabilise himself in the air. Lopt's raven managed to rip the small talking device from the other ravens claw. *"That's the moment,"* Slygod commanded assertively to Tim, placing his hand on his shoulder to share magical powers through his field of energy. According to their quickly established plan, Tim aimed his wand at the left masked wizard. Tim's mind memorised the necessary spell with unexpected ease. Lopt Slygod pointed his wand at the other enemy. *"Three, two, one, go! Oh Aiwas zeih der arnebei, birubi sie ihr giwahrnissa."*

The spell was cast almost simultaneously, and both threats fell to the ground, unconscious. Tim's mind was boggled with the fact that he, albeit charged by Lopts energy, managed to draw a wand and speak a charm. Seeing such paranormal phenomena taking place was one thing, actively engaging was something entirely different. *"Very good, that was lit for a first try!"* Slygod remarked to Tim, who replied proudly, *"It just had to work."* Lopt Slygod's raven continued to fool his counterpart, luring him far away. After opening the vehicle, Lopt checked on the condition of the two kidnapped officers. "*They don't look wounded, let's lift them onto this bench behind the parking lot, bordering the football field."* The inert victims were heavier than expected, but with combined effort, they were placed on the bench. Now it was time to free Sharon Waterfield, the witch supposed to save the daylight, who had already regained consciousness. With a spell whispered so quietly that Tim Meyer's ears couldn't quite catch it, the ropes were lifted.

The task at hand seemed simple. Introducing himself to Sharon Waterfield in a way that would not only make her recognise him by his outfit but also calm her after the stressful situation she had just endured. Sharon's chest rose and fell rapidly, her breath shallow. Stricken with torment and stressful irritation, she tried her best to maintain a polite demeanour towards her unfamiliar saviours. After adjusting her scrunchies, she cast an observant gaze over the now unconscious pursuers and officers, recalling what had just transpired. *"I was kidnapped at the train station. You two must have saved my life. From the bottom of my heart, thank you,"* she said, her voice filled with honesty and gratitude. Yet, there was an air of sass and dismissiveness about her. Sharon currently felt powerless and reliant on others, so her instincts turned her sentiments defensive. Finally, Sharon's mind processed the image of Tim Meyer standing before her. Her breath caught. "*Wa... What? You're the man I've dreamt about frequently. The surroundings were different, we met at a food stall and..."* She stopped abruptly as another wave of shock overcame her. Turning slightly to the left, she noticed Lopt. *"He was there too, as a barkeeper."*

Tim Meyer stood frozen, his composure shattered at the sight of Sharon. Audun had provided him with a rough description of her, though to Tim, there was so much more to Sharon than a vague profile. Seeing Sharon for the first time deeply moved him. Her face held a blend of everything Tim considered beautiful. Prominent features mingled effortlessly with adorable details, such as those few endearing freckles on her elevated cheekbones. Her chestnut brown hair fell ever so gently, framing her countenance. Her eyes, glimmering in shades of hazelnut brown, were complemented by long, natural lashes. As the TFF had already hinted when selecting her codename, Sharon indeed bore a resemblance to the Hollis Gondler character, Irmgard. And her voice, feminine and witty, captivated him even more than he'd imagined. Sharon Waterfield's overall appearance stirred a storm of emotions within him. He hadn't expected her to be this beautiful. Depictions of witches were common in his country, but they were nothing like the woman standing before him now. Tim's heart fluttered with excitement, his voice silenced by astonishment, though most people would probably have seen her as 'cute at best'.

Lopt Slygod quickly understood the meaning behind Tim's lack of action and giggled mischievously. *"Look,"* he began, *"those nightly visions of yours have been initiated by forces, which tried to contact you. My name is Lopt Slygod, and this fellow next to me is Tim Meyer. You'll be working with him a lot as a team."* Sharon Waterfield, filled with a mix of bewilderment and disbelief, nervously shifted her attention between Tim and Lopt. Slygod's words felt so far removed from her usual perception of reality. After some internal struggle, Tim finally managed to regain his focus. *"It's true, Sharon Waterfield."* Her mouth and eyes widened as she heard him say her name. *"All of this is surprising, difficult to imagine and hard to grasp as a whole. I know, I had to go through this initial state of shock myself a week ago. Apparently, you are a witch destined to fulfil a prophecy where you will save the planet as we know it."* She shook her head, visibly confounded and annoyed by the unbearable responsibility entrusted to her.

Sharon Waterfield raised an eyebrow, looking utterly flabbergasted. Lopt took over again. *"To put it simply, there are thousands upon thousands of magicians living within society in secret orders, scattered all around the world, and they've been doing so for centuries. Let's address our situation. Almost two thousand years ago, an evil giant named Munrir terrorised all others folks, until fate punished him. The rays of sunlight harmed him, forcing him to live far underground in deep, wet caves. One day, an order of magic, discovered him while searching for rare minerals. Munrir convinced them that he was a mighty being chosen to rule over all mankind with benevolence. He promised those who followed him powerful positions along with wealth and status in a newly formed society. In exchange, they would aid him in dimming the sunlight by manipulating a mythical pillar hidden somewhere within the inner earth."* He paused to catch his breath, giving Sharon a moment to let it all sink in, a necessary pause when faced with such an outlandish new reality. Despite her initial disdain towards this unbidden role she had to play, Sharon couldn't simply face such a monolithic issue with indifference. She had just been living the life of a twenty-year-old girl, one year younger than Tim Meyer. Sharon had only recently completed her first year at Edinburgh Napier University.

Focusing on computer studies could have opened many opportunities for her in Germany, but now she was meant to be a witch. Slygod regained his vocal strength. *"After that, they changed their order's name from 'Unbeknownst Wisdom' to 'Lancers of the New Order' (LNO)."* Sharon paid close attention in order to fully grasp the entire story. However, one aspect aroused her suspicion. *"If this evil giant is unable to stand sunlight, why doesn't he simply sleep throughout the day and leave the cave at night?" "It would be a logical solution, although unlike humans, giants are unable to change their daily rhythm. Monster biology is often oddly specific."* Tim felt compelled to interject, understanding Sharon's struggle to process all of this. *"Don't worry, Sharon,"* he said warmly. *"You're not alone in this. I'm here to help you, and the entire task force, called TFF, has your back as well."* An exhausted sigh escaped her lips. *"Why does it have to be me?"* She whined mournfully and gestured resentfully. *"As if there aren't billions of other girls out there."* Tim noted a distinct Scottish accent rising with her discontent. *"Who'd be reacting in the very same way."* Lopt interrupted with a judging facial expression.

"Look Sharon, sometimes we can only make the best out of it. Though there shouldn't even be a problem if you're already destined to succeed." Tim made his best effort to comfort Sharon, who directed a distant, unkind glance at him. He turned his attention to Lopt. *"It would be good if we started heading back to my friends. They might get suspicious. I left them almost an hour ago."* Lopt frowned thoughtfully. "*You're really developing a knack for these secret missions. Why don't you take Sharon with you and tell them you've made a new friend?"* Sharon Waterfield corroborated with a nod, more convinced by practical reasoning than the possibility of a new friendship. "*It's basically a no-brainer. I'll tell them we got acquainted at a food stall. How good are their English skills?"* Tim replied, "*We've been familiar with it since primary school. Their skills will be adequate enough for you."* After this initial clarification, Sharon Waterfield developed a vague understanding of her and Tim Meyer's shared, more or less welcomed fate. It wasn't entirely clear whether the LNO's observation raven eventually turned to follow our adventurers or if Lopt Slygod still kept him busy. Without his talking device he couldn't do much regardless.

Sharon, Tim and Lopt moved at a fast, determined pace, disappearing into the still ongoing, though slightly less vibrant, River Lights Festival. Some elderly people along with others who had brought their children had already left. Others attempted to convince the food stall owners to gift them leftover drinks and food as they already prepared to wrap up. The moon cast its silver glimmer on the river around which the festivities took place. Hundreds of tea lights, lanterns and fairy lights blended into each other's glow. Forstquelle's spa park was nestled in the valley's narrow bottom, winding along the steadily streaming river. This setting offered plenty of good spots to place the colourful lights, providing ample room for benches seated at scenic viewpoints. Cautiously Tim tried to side eye Sharon, her profile making him feel as though he were on an adventure with Irmgard herself. He pondered whether her sassy attitude towards him was simply due to a rocky start or an integral characteristic of hers, hoping the former presumption was true.

It took the trio some effort to locate the rest of their group. Slygod decided that remaining separate from the others was the best and least suspicious choice, so he headed to his own food stall. Before splitting off, Lopt luckily remembered they needed a way to communicate with Tim and his witch in the future. *"Wait a minute, Tim Meyer and Sharon Waterfield, we still need to exchange some numbers." "Sure, of course,"* Tim replied, reaching for his phone. But Lopt stopped him. *"Not in your regular contacts, Tim. Search and download this specific app."* Tim glanced at Slygod's phone screen. Confused by the app's name, he raised an eyebrow and gave a suspicious look. *"Broomracer 101? That sounds more like a game." "That's exactly what they wanted to achieve at Task Force Fir. It lets us keep in contact while appearing as just a silly, low-budget phone game."* The trio made sure no one was paying attention to their discussion. Meyer and Waterfield installed Broomracer 101 on their phones. The icon appeared exactly like a low-effort, low-budget video game, featuring a single broom in very low resolution. Tim tapped on the icon, but the app failed to load. *"Hey Lopt, it doesn't work. It says 'failed to load. Error'." "Pretty much the same over here,"* Sharon remarked.

Slygod nodded, widening his eyes and forming a conspiratorial smile. *"That's intentional, another feature to keep it hidden. You have to press this little reload button three times within seven seconds."* Tim and his witch followed the instructions. A new window opened, displaying an empty list of contacts. *"That's unironically lit,"* Tim Meyer remarked. Numbers were quickly exchanged, and once done, Lopt Slygod addressed Sharon and Tim for the last time that evening. *"Try to stay under the radar as best you can folks. Remember, we can trust no one but ourselves in this valley. I'll most likely contact you as early as tomorrow."* He turned his eyes directly to Sharon Waterfield. *"Especially you. For the next few days, hide in his apartment. If you need anything, ask Tim. From now on, he's your Witches' Paladin, something between a manager and a business partner, but just for a witch."* An averse look played across the Scottish witch's face. "*I'm definitely not going to share such close confinement with a guy I just met. I'm not one of these girls, sorry."* Understanding her sentiment, Tim nodded. *"Don't worry, I anticipated that and already turned my living room into an entirely separate space by installing a door. We'll arrange a timetable for bathroom use."* For the first time, Sharon reacted positively, a warm smile lighting her face, delighted by Tim's thoughtfulness. Sharon retrieved a hydro flask from her bag and took a sip. She glanced at Tim, who noticed her gaze didn't linger on him with annoyance, just mild overwhelm and perhaps a touch of exhaustion. *"I hate that term as well, but sometimes we have to go with the flow, you know."* Lopt Slygod couldn't stop himself from chuckling at Tim's unintended rhyme. *"That's the spirit. Anyway, see you later, children of the night."* He turned around and approached his food stall casually, as if the evening's adventure had never occurred.

"He's a truly unique character, isn't he? Lopt possesses the power of shape shifting, I think it might come in handy sooner than we expect." Sharon squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head. *"Doesn't that basically mean he's able to change his entire appearance?" "Erm, yes, it does,"* Tim answered. Some members, however, weren't present at all. Ekaterina, her boyfriend Bedirhan, as well as Franziska and Martin must have left earlier.

"So at least one of your mates knows about a possible subtenant, right?" Sharon inquired. "*Yep, his name is Dennis, the one with the dark blonde hair." "Got it,"* Sharon confirmed, the wit she possessed tangible in her voice. *"Fortunately, I took some acting classes, so leave the explanations to me."* Giddy with anticipation to see how capable an impromptu actress she was, Tim let her take the lead. The duo went in for the approach. All of a sudden Sharon spoke with a much lighter voice. *"Hey, you must be Tim's friends, right? He's spoken so much about you. My name is Sharon Waterfield, and I recently moved from Edinburgh's ancient walls to your picturesque valley. I'm Tim's new subtenant, we met here by coincidence. I hope you can excuse me for keeping him occupied nearly the entire evening. It's important to me to know who I'm dealing with, hope you guys understand."* Sharon had only a slight Scottish accent, which allowed Tim's friends to understand her fairly well. Ronald, who was somewhat more proficient in English than the others, decided to answer for the group. *"Oh, we were just starting to wonder what was taking Tim so long to show up."* His girlfriend Miriam's gaze shifted between Tim and Sharon, revealing a silent hint of an unexpected but welcome surprise. *"It's epic that you've managed to spend some quality time together. A good relationship between a landlord and tenant never hurts, especially when sharing close proximity like an apartment."* Tim nodded, evidently relieved at how convincing Sharon's performance had been. "*Yes, we did have a great time. Sharing an apartment with her is just bound to be a good time."* A few moments of silence followed. Dennis broke it by yawning, covering his mouth with his arm. *"Well, it's already a bit late, folks. I do have some plans for tomorrow."*

Once again, the friends split up and bade farewell to each other. Dennis followed Tim and Sharon towards the BMW, which waited patiently in the parking lot. Sharon soldiered on, playing her role as the new girl in town. *"I'm so excited to start anew here. I've never really been a city lass myself. This rural region resonates with me."* She took a deep breath of the fresh summer night air. A thrill of excitement rushed through her body, and playing this secret game of forming a realistic façade for their shared mission felt surprisingly invigorating.

Tim, on the other hand, felt almost crushed by the weight on his shoulders. It had been a part of him since his teenage years, this fear of failure. He worried about disappointing his beautiful new witch companion, who still exhibited some indifference towards him. The unspoken question of whether she might eventually change this sentiment lingered. Another burden on his conscience was how to react if one of his friends discovered their otherworldly secret agenda. And then there was his partial responsibility for ensuring the sunlight's continued existence. Never before in his life had such a pressing alignment of trials troubled him.

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A few more steps and the familiar coupé's front came into view. Tim opened the door and moved his seat forward, allowing Sharon to take the back seat. With the trio on board, Tim started the engine. The six-cylinder inline engine purred steadily, carrying the friends through a star-filled summer night. *"I hope the new door will help set your personal boundaries. We installed it just a few days ago,"* Dennis remarked. Sharon leaned slightly forward, the undercover witch restlessly staying in character. *"Well, Dennis, let me tell you one thing. Tim and I got acquainted fairly quickly this evening. It was unexpected but not unwelcome. I suppose with someone of such unobtrusive character as Tim there shouldn't be much trouble between us, if any at all."* For the journey homewards, Tim was left with two options. He could either use the tunnel to avoid the old town of Forstquelle or take the road leading through it. His choice was rather easy. Within the town were hotels of all sizes, sectors decorated with greenery, an old theatre nearby, a recently built hospital, small restaurants and some cafés. A couple of these structures were constructed back in the eighteen hundreds, others built in the seventies or recently modernised. Dim streetlights contrasted with the neon glow from the bars, and even more so with the candlelit restaurants. From Tim's perspective, the town centre was still somewhat vibrant despite the late hour. *"At least Sharon should be positively surprised by the vivid nightlife,"* he thought. *"Is it always this sleepy here? Nightlife in Edinburgh is so much more vibrant."* Tim heartily chuckled at the contrast between his assumption and Sharon's perception.

Some ten minutes of driving brought them back to Kühltal. Shortly beyond the town sign, a steep road ascending sharply to the left led to Dennis's house. For centuries his family had been in charge of the inn. It was a lengthy structure housing guestrooms, a kitchen, storage rooms and, of course, the family's personal quarters. Bordering the woods behind it, its rustic architectural style suited the Black Forest aesthetic perfectly. They dropped Dennis off there and it was his turn to bid farewell. Now that Sharon wasn't required to play her role any longer, an awkward silence filled the car. Unexpectedly for Tim, she broke it. *"Sorry for being such a brat. It's just that I hate finding myself in unwanted situations."* Each time Sharon displayed honest feelings, her Scottish accent emerged. Once noted, her emotional state became clearly evident to the observer. Tim comforted her with the words *"It's simply much to fathom, but we can do it, together."* For a second their gazes meaningfully connected, causing Tim to nearly stray from the road.

With the BMW parked in the garage directly adjacent to his parents' house, the clear night sky glittered with endless armadas of stars. Sharon took the steps up to Tim's apartment as quickly as he usually did. Tim turned the key a second time to unlock the door. In silent agreement, they both placed their shoes directly behind the entrance. The first thing Sharon Waterfield noticed was a white corridor, with jackets gathered around a clothes rack. A picture on the wall depicting a Mediterranean coastal house provided some decoration. *"See that door over there? It used to be my living room, but now it's your quarters. Go inside and get a first impression."* She approached the door and pressed the handle down. What Sharon saw was an almost empty but clean room. *"So this is my hiding place until further instructions?"* She stepped inside and sat down on the couch. "*Well, since I should avoid exposing myself, you'll have to transfer my stuff here. I've rented an Airbnb near the main bus stop. You'll notice how much cosier it'll be after I've made some adjustments."* Tim replied, *"I'll get your stuff tomorrow. Trust me, you won't miss anything."* A barely audible, *"Thank you…",* escaped Sharon's lips.

Chapter six – Old Friends and new Dimensions

Just as the weather forecast predicted, Saturday and Sunday unfolded as warm, sunny days. Contrary to his expectations, Lopt Slygod didn't provide either Tim or Sharon with any further instructions, leaving an ever-present undercurrent of worry in the air. No texts arrived from Lopt, and Broomracer 101's message box remained empty. What if the Lancers of the New Order had captured him, as they had already attempted with Sharon last Friday? Perhaps he was in hiding, like Sharon, or maybe the TFF's communication app had been compromised. Despite the serenity of those warm summer days, fear and concern lingered. Yet, meaningful bonds often form during troubled times.

As Sharon's belongings were moved from her Airbnb, Tim Meyer's former living room came back to life, now infused with the witch's distinctive personality. At the back of the room, a large window offered a limited view of the forest edge. Just a few yards behind the Meyers' house, a river flowed northwards, following the valley path, parallel to the railway situated just beyond it. All of this was bordered by the low ridge mountain extending upwards. If one opened the window and leaned slightly to the left, one could see a chain of tiny allotment gardens scattered across the slopes. Many locals spent their leisure time there with friends and family. A young father practised football with his little son. Sharon Waterfield turned her attention to this scene, feeling like a wild animal trapped in a cage, constantly confronted with freedom outside yet unable to break free. Tim Meyer knocked on her door. She rolled her eyes, reluctant to allow him to break her thoughtful silence. "Sure, come in…" "Still nothing from Lopt. I hope the room is at least to your liking," Tim said, forcing a friendly and encouraging smile. "I can't say anything bad about your room, though this part of the world is rather drowsy. Come to the window." He followed her bidding to gain an impression of her perspective. As Tim leaned close to her, Sharon reacted scornfully. "Not that close please." After providing her with more space, she tilted her head towards the quaint scenery outside.

“I mean, don’t you see it yourself?” Tim shook his head in confusion. “What do you mean, everything as usual.” Despite her unwillingness, she felt obliged to make her point. “There’s nothing particularly bad about quaint places, but this one gives me horror movie vibes. It possesses an air of melancholy, I’d say.” The corner of Tim’s mouth curled into a roguish smirk. “What’s more fitting to a witch than some rural horror movie setting.” Sharon gasped sharply, forming a fierce glance. “I’m not a...” The reminder that she indeed was a witch stopped Sharon in her tracks. Instead, a snippy attitude surfaced on her face, although one of a rather playful nature. With crossed arms, a raised eyebrow and a teasing glint in her eyes, Sharon faced Tim, whose heart did a somersault. To him, she looked utterly adorable in this pose. The softness within his green orbs didn’t go unnoticed by Sharon, which flustered her. “What’s so special about cities? They don’t offer anything more than traffic jams, crowded spaces and plenty of stress.” Once more Sharon rolled her eyes and cast a glance at the world outside. “I give it up farm boy.” She retorted.

“However, I’m pretty sure we both can agree on being tired of waiting for hours.” Tim stated. “Seldom has a more truthful statement left your lips.” Sharon replied. “Let’s just hope nothing bad happened. The fewer loops we have to jump through, the faster we can return to our normal life.” Suddenly, as if Sharon's plea had been heard, Tim’s phone interrupted their moment. A notification from Broomracer 101, it was Lopt Slygod. Tim chuckled, feeling triumphant. “See, he's got everything under control. Let me read his message.” A wave of relief washed over Sharon. A mouthful from the grangerized Water Flask refreshed her senses. Was this the long-awaited liberation? Tim cleared his throat. “He wrote, ‘Hey Tim and Sharon, I hope you’ve kept under the radar without any trouble. I’ve got a solution for your problem, but it requires you to travel, not just to another country, but to a parallel universe. If you close this chat window and select the group chat menu, you’ll find a list of different TFF members, one of them called Richard Midlander.’” Tim’s breath hitched, and he froze in shock upon hearing the name. There was a good reason for this. Tim Meyers' state of utter astonishment proved

contagious, affecting Sharon Waterfield as well. “Tim… Tim, what on earth happened? Why did you stop?”

Lost for words, his eyes wide with disbelief at seeing the name, Tim headed over to the sofa and focused his gaze on the low black table, appearing as though he mistook the table’s dark pattern for an abyss. “About ten years ago, I began regular contact with an online friend from Norway. He’s a very unpredictable kind of person. One day he's fully invested in 1970s street art of New York's Bronx, the next he ignites a lengthy discussion concerning traditional Asian music. Perhaps I’m exaggerating a bit here, let's just say Richard is a very good lad to chat with whilst drinking coffee or simply taking a break. We've shared many moments, going through good and bad times together, sharing pain and happiness. He has a peculiar side to him, but he mostly struck me as a pragmatic person.” Tim reopened Broomracer, selected the group chat option, and clicked on Midlander’s profile. “No doubt.” Tim shook his head in disbelief while Sharon observed his behaviour closely. Behind her unimpressed and sceptical countenance, she found this unique friendship Tim was so fond of rather adorable. “That slaps, it's him. My good old chat friend is part of this wizard society,” he exclaimed in pure amazement.

“But that's actually great if you think about it. He sounds like someone we can trust.” She took a few steps to join Tim on the sofa, crossing her legs as she sat down. “He looks somewhat competent. I can't explain it, but there's something confident about him.” “Oh look, there's even a description of Richard's abilities,” Tim remarked. “Specialist guide for safe interdimensional travel. Provides vital assistance for entering and exiting mysterious realms.” Sharon raised an eyebrow and cast a suspicious glance at Tim. “Are you for real? Just when I thought this outlandish new reality couldn't get any stranger. That's science fiction stuff, alternative realms? Utter humbug. Ask Lopt about this whole interdimensional travel thing.” Tim replied to Lopt’s message. “We're actually doing quite okay. I know this Richard Midlander, his description says he's some sort of guide to other dimensions. Can you elaborate on this, Lopt?” A reply arrived with unexpected speed. “You and your witch need to seek refuge in another dimension. Richard Midlander is the right man for this. I can shape-shift into your likeness for the time

being. Is tomorrow at 10 am okay for me to visit? Just text me your address and we'll handle the details as a team.” Tim turned to Sharon and nodded. She returned the gesture.

Time and place shared with their companion Lopt, it was now up to Tim to contact his other peculiar but undoubtedly likeable buddy from the cold north of Norway, Richard Midlander. Once again, Tim used the chat app Broomracer. "Ehm, Jo, I never thought I would actually ask you such a question, but we might need your help with entering another world. 'We' in this case means me and a lady called Sharon Waterfield." After about five minutes of waiting, an answer followed. "Good day, Timofey. It’s indeed a small world isn’t it?" Richard insisted on keeping certain customs of their chat alive, which had been established over the years. One of them was the habit of him constantly creating new versions of Tim's name, like Tam, Theordorious, or in this case, Timofey. "I already know everything buddy. Lopt Slygod informed me this morning, didn’t he mention that?" Tim’s curiosity was piqued after reading this last part, and he took a closer look at Lopt’s previously sent message. Indeed, it said that Richard had been notified of Tim’s and Sharon’s ongoing mission, which now required them to disappear for several days.

"Actually, yes, Rich, I didn’t bother to read it all," he texted back. Richard's reply followed immediately. "Ah of course, you didn’t bother reading the full thing. Why would you? Taking into account that the great genius Tim Meyer knows it all from the start." Unfortunately, Richard Midländer’s harsh critique held some truth. It was a weakness of Tim to approach things with a far too carefree attitude, which made him prone to fail due to easily avoidable mistakes.

Tim turned his gaze towards Sharon, who was looking at him judgementally. "Well, we should have read the entire message, shouldn’t we? How you do one thing is how you do everything."

"Chill, Sharon, one text message not entirely read doesn’t give anyone reason to freak out. That’s a first world problem." His fingers tapped quickly on the phone's screen. "Don’t make such a big deal about it. I was just taken aback to see your name here. My life turned into a rollercoaster of unexpected encounters.

Now, let’s return to the dimension in question. How will this world look? Will everything be upside down? Is it a kingdom ruled by a zombie king or a concert held by a goblin rock band?"

Richard chuckled at the other end. "No, none of that. I think you’ll really like it, or at least I hope so, given your fondness for tropical islands, vaporwave and neon lights." Sharon kept a watchful eye on the exchange of messages. "What the bloody bahookie is vaporwave?" Her voice betrayed her straining curiosity. Tim Meyer adjusted his shirt and cleared his throat. "Well, I was going to describe it as a musical genre, but honestly, it’s an entire art movement. It started with people on the internet slowing down and looping parts of old songs, but then new creations emerged, along with thousands of subgenres. There's also a whole visual aesthetic and even some fashion. Imagine a quirky, dreamlike, futuristic version of the late eighties and early nineties, with a touch of nostalgia for a decade you didn't even live through, and that's basically vaporwave." Sharon looked away, raising her brows in utter bafflement. "Okay, though it's really surprising that, out of all people, some bloke from the countryside finds himself drawn to such an oddly specific kind of music. To me there’s only techno, the music perfectly matching the life-granting pulse of our hearts." Tim didn’t want to let the opportunity for a fitting rejoinder slip by. He mimicked Sharon's earlier gesture of appalled surprise. "Okay. Now I’m surprised that such a poetic thought formed in such a superficial brat’s mind."

Sharon gasped in shock, a teasing gaze forming on her face. In fact, it was the very same expression Tim found somewhat adorable earlier on. It hinted more at an upcoming playful battle of wits rather than cold disdain. He would have fancied engaging in it, but the mission at hand demanded his attention return to the chat. "I see, mate. Can’t wait to see it myself, just slightly worried about the act of transitioning itself." "I get that," Richard replied. "But the whole process is much less dramatic than you might imagine. There are certain portals throughout the world that lead to another dimension. Sometimes it’s a treacherous cave, other times it’s just a simple door in some abandoned building. Let me surprise you and your witch." Tim was about to wrap things up when a last message from Richard interrupted him.

"Hey, just wanted to add that I'm really excited to meet you in person for once. We've been friends for over ten years yet never saw each other." Tim smiled softly at the screen. "Me too bro, me too," he answered.

The early birds tweeting alongside the lively rays of the morning sun announced the new day. A day marked by an act neither Tim nor Sharon could have ever dreamed of, interdimensional travel. Sharon and Tim woke up early that morning, packed their bags as if for a short holiday, and indulged in their breakfast. Although Lopt and Richard would never lure the duo into a life-threatening situation of starvation, both decided that caution was the best approach in any scenario. This led Tim to do the unthinkable, having an extensive breakfast with oatmeal, bacon and eggs, and a gigantic glass of orange juice. He was filled to the brim from his breakfast. “You're very apt at cooking, I reckon. It was really good, though I think I need to skip lunch.” Sharon glanced at Tim with gratitude in her eyes. Apparently, she found herself unexpectedly comforted by his sincere compliment. Their eyes lingered on each other, not a single word was spoken. Tim felt as if the softness flickering in Sharon’s hazel orbs ardently caressed his heart. The moment nearly coaxed him into carefully wording another compliment when an intrusive ringing of his doorbell interrupted this rare moment of affection.

Just as announced and perfectly on time, Lopt Slygod and Richard Midlander arrived. Tim Meyer casually answered their request to enter with, “Sure, come in.” For him, this moment was filled with anticipation. He had never seen Richard Midlander in person before, despite chatting with him for a decade. With a polite handshake and a friendly hello, Lopt stepped over the doorstep, his short black curly hair appearing slightly messier than usual. Richard followed him. What Tim didn't expect was how closely Richard’s appearance mirrored his own. The difference was Richard's dirty blonde straight hair and blue eyes, two traits Tim also had during his childhood before his hair turned hazel like Sharon’s eyes, curly, and his eyes green. “Well, the historical meeting finally takes place, Richard Midlander and Tim Meyer meeting for the first time.” The peculiar Norwegian greeted him with, “I’m really glad we finally see each other in real life, that’s epic,” followed by a brotherly hug. Sharon perceptively observed

the moments unfolding and couldn't stop herself from finding it undoubtedly wholesome. Her suspicion towards Tim decreased even further. Maybe she started to see this 'bloke from the countryside' in an entirely new light.

Tim's former living room, now Sharon Waterfield's accommodation, swiftly transformed into a small TFF headquarters. "You really look different from your chat avatar, Riccardo," Richard Midlander laughed heartily. "Oh, that was just a photo of some serious-looking random, not actually me. I picked it because I found it funny." Lopt Slygod interrupted their trivial chat. "Ladies and gentlemen, shouldn't we return to business?" "Indeed we should, Tim," Sharon added, causing Richard to chuckle again. "It's good you got acquainted so quickly. You'll need to get along well, as you'll likely be some of the only inhabitants on that floating island." "That's true," Slygod remarked. "Your temporary hiding place will be an island floating freely on an unknown body of water, most likely some sort of ocean given its vastness." Sharon Waterfield leaned back into the comfort of the sofa. "How is this entire interdimensional travelling even possible? I'm not unfamiliar with the theoretical concept of other universes and timelines, yet I never expected it to extend beyond mere theories."

Lopt Slygod and Richard Midlander, stumped by her question, shrugged. "To be quite frank, it's still an unexplainable phenomenon. All alternative realms and their entrances have been discovered by chance. Actively searching for them is like looking for a needle in a haystack. The most common understanding is that certain energies exist at specific places, allowing travel. Maybe one day someone will find an explanation. Your odd island is called Neon Beach, one of the lesser-travelled places. There's only one entry point." "It's quite funny, the entrance is through the door of a fridge inside an old, run-down hotel. It's not far from here, it'll take us about an hour to drive there." Tim Meyer sought further clarification. "Let me get this straight, we'll be hiding there for a while, and Lopt will basically function as my double." Slygod nodded. "Yes, that's the plan." He handed a sheet of paper to Tim. "Me playing you accurately is vital. Give me some belongings you're attached to, this will allow for the most effective

shape shift. After that, provide me with some notes about your daily life here, things like who to expect and what you've planned to do this week."

Provided with this simple instruction, Tim walked into his room and firmly grabbed the old-fashioned, skilfully decorated letter opener, with which he had already opened hundreds of letters. As he returned to Sharon's room and handed it over to Lopt Slygod, he received a humorous glance in return. "Blimey, Tim, those decorations are exquisite. I didn't expect you to own such a swag letter opener. Why did you choose this particular item?" Lopt asked. Tim paused, considering the best way to describe it while Lopt and Richard sat there, filled with anticipation. "Well, to me, it symbolises that even in pragmatism, there's often some hidden beauty. A few years ago, my grandmother asked if I'd like to have it, and I accepted. Since then, I've used it to open every letter, some with good news, others with bad. But many memories are attached to this piece, mundane though it may seem." Sharon seemed uninterested in his statement, her thoughts still preoccupied with spending some time upon a mysterious floating island, resembling a futuristic version of the past.

"Bro, it's a letter opener. Don't make such a fuss about it," Richard Midlander remarked, rolling his eyes. "That's good enough for me, though. I believe him," Lopt commented. With the letter opener in one hand and his wand in the other, he closed his eyes. A meditative nasal breath was followed by its release through his mouth. As if standing on a rotating platform, Lopt began turning without moving his feet. The motion proceeded faster and faster until he transformed into an incarnated version of a vortex. Slygod's movement created a strong wind, blowing some papers off the low coffee table. Instinctively, Sharon, Richard and Tim covered their eyes. As soon as the mini-storm subsided, they lowered their arms and saw that Lopt had fully transformed into Tim Meyer. Sharon and Tim stared at each other in utter disbelief. Only his clothing, consisting of blue jeans and a check-patterned cotton shirt, allowed any distinction. Richard Midlander's reaction was far more nonchalant compared to Sharon's and Tim's utter

disbelief, as it wasn't the first time he had seen Lopt shapeshifting. "Well, this time you've outdone yourself," he remarked.

The task at hand didn't allow either Tim or Sharon much time to dwell on this new, incomparable experience. Tim provided Lopt with a list of dos and don'ts to help him play his role convincingly. Now it was solely up to Richard Midlander to play his part. There were no adventurous rides through the night, no thrilling pursuits thus far. Their departure took place on an ordinary Monday morning. The journey led them north-westwards, breaching the region's border. Beyond lay a partly hilly, partly flat landscape. The dense dark woods of the Silvan Black Forest gave way to a much brighter deciduous landscape. Tim and Lopt remained in constant contact during the drive, with Lopt's raven following them as an escort. Everything seemed to be going according to plan until the raven notified Lopt Slygod of a potential problem. "Sky eye to tower, sky eye to tower, two vehicles are closing in. They keep on following codename Dragon Boat." This message sent shivers down Lopt's spine, and he informed Tim that their plan might have been compromised. If it were indeed wizards from the Lancers of the New Order following them, this would pose a serious threat. One or two well-aimed spells could easily make it look like a traffic accident. "Richard, it looks like someone is following us. We need to get these cars off our backs." "God damn, I know something that'll shake these stalkers," Richard grouched. He kept his promise to the letter.

Richard pressed his foot onto the accelerator, leaving the motorway in a risky manoeuvre. The trio sweated profusely, expecting a horrible accident at any moment, yet Richard's driving surprised all three of them. He took a sharp turn rightwards onto a smaller street bordered by a lengthy dirt road. By overtaking a lorry, he finally had the chance to activate his car's special gadget by pressing two switches. A thick beige fog steamed over the bonnet. With a risky drifting manoeuvre, he steered his modified Mercedes 180 into a shadowy parking area. The two pursuers roared their engines, rushing off into the distance. "How come these gawks just bypassed us?" Sharon asked. Richard smiled triumphantly. "A

selectable tank is attached to the washer system. Once activated, a smoke made of ivy, incense, and elderberry flows over the car's surface and renders it invisible." Relieved once more, Tim leaned back into his seat. "Richard, that ingenious idea saved all our butts. Thank you, my man, you rule."

Chapter seven – A mighty new Wand

The final kilometres concluded without any further disruption, leading them to an overgrown estate seated at the outskirts of a medium-sized town. Sprawling tendrils of raspberries with their intrusive sharp spikes slowed the trio's movement. Annoyance over the disproportionally represented plant swiftly became evident on everyone's face. *"Oh silly me, forgot that there's an actual spell for that."* Richard Midländer remarked, his comment drawing bewilderment into Sharon and Tim's minds. Richard pointed his wand, bearing the colour pattern of a birch tree, at the raspberry tendrils in front of them. Whilst performing a lifting motion with his wand he uttered the words, "Ris ja hit min staban nithra gadalwa." The intricate net of plants rose from the ground and floated above them, forming a roof of greenery. "Pretty neat." Tim praised his Norwegian friend with a gratifying tap on his shoulder.

Now the image clarified. In front of them perched a quirky old hotel constructed in a style far too tropical for the Central European nature around it. However, despite the fading colour, once a vibrant red, and all the rubbish surrounding it, the hotel lacked any eerie aspect. Not even the dark path leading into the garage below was enough to conjure discomfort. The entire place just felt as though it had fallen out of time. A building once bustling with activity now enjoyed its symbolic retirement, liberated from matching any expectations. To their surprise, though, the backdoor was open. Tim was the first to enter, intentionally doing so to appear courageous in front of Sharon. The initial view of the estate's interior painted a clear picture. Mould covered every corner of the rooms, the floors were a minefield of shattered glass, with tools and objects carelessly strewn about, and the parts of the walls untouched by mould were

a canvas of graffiti. “It’s been basically abandoned since the late eighties,” Richard Midländer remarked. “It’s remarkable that it’s still standing without any maintenance,” Sharon observed.

Richard's unpredictable "Oh wait" drew both Tim and Sharon’s attention. He dashed towards the window in swift movements aimed his wand at the floating raspberries and lowered them with gentle care. "That’s basic witchcraft 101, always conceal your spell work. Keep in mind though, the more you restrain yourself from using it, the less detectable evidence remains." "It’s a reasonable approach for sure," Tim added while Sharon glanced at a mould-infested corner, her face twisted in tangible disgust. "Ew, let's just keep going. Neon Island is what I'm here for." "Right," Richard Midlander agreed. "All you have to do is open this particular fridge door and step in." He indicated an outdated, cream-white fridge positioned in the centre of the kitchen. Tim Meyer nodded, but Sharon Waterfield began to feel anxious. "I'm a bit uneasy about this whole concept of using magical portals." Richard frowned, casting a stern gaze at her. "You're a witch, girl. If you start wetting your pants over some portal, I foresee a dark future for us. So drop this wishy-washy attitude and show some competence." Sharon shot back a look of fierce disdain, clearly provoked. "I'm not wishy-washy. Tim, let me go first." Tim, eager to support Sharon's forced confidence, opened the door, and a now-agitated Sharon stepped inside. To her surprise, the interior of another fridge appeared before her.

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She pushed against it and found herself in a large, entirely vacant household goods store. The appliances displayed there, as if confidently awaiting buyers, featured designs predating all three friends. "Come over, Tim, I made it safely," she whispered. Tim Meyer bid farewell to Richard Midlander. "Unless instructed otherwise, I'll pick you guys up in five days. Don't worry about food, water or sanitation, it's all there. Have a nice stay." The peculiar Norwegian and the young German shook hands. "We'll make the best of it. Don't let the bedbugs bite." Tim then followed Sharon into the universe. After a moment, he stood next to her again. "This store looks a bit stuck in time, doesn't it?" he commented,

allowing his puzzled gaze to sweep across the brightly lit room. "You're right. If the old hotel has been abandoned since the late eighties, then there might be a coalition between those timelines." A flush of unexpected admiration for Sharon's wit rushed through Tim. He hadn't expected her to forge a hypothesis explaining this mysterious level so effortlessly.

They didn't stay long in the household goods store, as its doors opened into the hallways of a classic American mall, an unpredictable zone eager to be explored. Filled with the curiosity of tourists, they took in the mall's view. Glass door lined up after glass door, shiny white tiles matching each other perfectly. Large billboards displayed unfamiliar brands and old fashions, creating a tapestry of the past. Each of the plentiful anchor stores that occupied the spaces boasted products, clothing and various food items. They appeared well-stocked, almost as if expecting a profitable number of customers to storm the empty mall at any second. Tim Meyer headed over to a pizza stall and tried a slice of Margherita. "This one slaps. Warm and fresh," the young German's relief was audible in his voice. "Now I understand why neither Richard nor Lopt seemed worried about our supply situation." Sharon took a seat on one of the brightly magenta coloured chairs in the food court, her eyes locked onto the blue patterns of a large concrete plant pot depicting sea life, which formed a large crescent around the area.

Her voice betrayed discard, since the nonsensical nature of their new surroundings rendered any attempt of reasoning worthless. "I suppose we just have to throw our perception of reality and logic in the bin. That's the only bloody approach one can have to this place. Apparently, the food remains fresh and decay doesn't exist." Tim took a closer look at a marvellously lively palm tree with vibrant, fresh hues. "Maybe some spirits or elves keep cooking and cleaning. By now everything seems possible." "That would be quite braw if we had that in our world as well," Sharon commented light-heartedly, a break from her usual distant behaviour. In some remote corner of Tim's mind, responsible for dreams, expectations and possibilities, a minuscule sparkle flickered. Maybe, just maybe, their shared adventure would eventually lead to some sort of kinship. But this remained an unspoken hypothesis, because he refrained

from wording it out loud, at least for now. With half his mouth full of food, Tim asked, "What does braw mean?" "Basically it's the same as lovely," she explained. "Oh, didn't know that. But what's certain is that we should learn more expressions from Neon Island."

Sharon Waterfield agreed, and both left the old-fashioned temple of consumerism.

When the mall's entrance's huge glass doors slid to their left and right, an almost artistic scenery unravelled. His brain had a hard time comprehending the information his eyes were providing. Neon Island's first impression was that of a tropical town with dozens of apartment buildings, a vast variety of palm trees, plant pots and street lights. Not a single car roamed the road. Countless neon lights blended with the soothing, slowly fading rays of the evening sun, which was about to disappear into the endless ocean. Not a piece of rubbish lingered on the ground, just the occasional gathering of travelling sand, hinting at a nearby beach. The sun itself differed vastly from our dimension's counterpart. It appeared much larger, perhaps four times the usual size. Its hue transitioned harmoniously from a lush yellow down to a slightly darker orange, finally concluding in a shade of violet. The eye-popping ball was separated into horizontal stripes, as if someone had sliced it into pieces and put it loosely back together, leaving space between each of them. "It looks like some aesthetic wallpaper," Tim Meyer stuttered.

"It's vivid, tropical, and even slightly whimsical," the now equally amazed Sharon added. Flabbergasted, they continued their ecpedition. As Tim and Sharon strutted through the neon-illuminated streets, colourful arcades and statues of Greek gods became more prevalent. "I expected a lot, Tim, but not a blend of classical Greek culture and a deserted Las Vegas," Sharon confessed. Tim pointed at an apartment seated one floor above a vending machine offering a variety of unfamiliar soft drinks.

"Look at this interior: a potted palm tree next to an old computer." Sharon glanced at the apartment.

"I can only recall very distant memories of such old technology. This place is really deceiving, it looks so modern, but the technology is two decades old."

After passing an empty, although clean and dimly lit cocktail bar, the beach finally came into view. It didn't take the two long to realise that this landmass was indeed a floating island. The centre, with

all its high-rises and malls, was perched upon a hill in its middle, which sloped equally to all sides until one reached a part rocky, part sandy beach. If one closely observed the motion of the waves, they appeared to be drifting away to the island's left and right rather than rolling and crashing softly against the beach. A circumstance that only occurred with floating objects, never with any mass of land.

The beach coaxed Tim and Sharon into spending some time there, even though it would have been much wiser to establish accommodation for the night. A pair of equally large rocks stood there, all too inviting to be ignored, so both took a seat upon them. Much like a lighthouse casting its authoritative cone of light across the horizon, Sharon sent a whimsful gaze out to sea. Whether she was discontent with their current situation or simply struggling with the ever-present responsibility placed upon her slender shoulders remained unclear to Tim. He wasn't very skilled at interpreting facial expressions and found himself far more captivated by her display of feminine grace. The gigantic red sun slowly sank into the ocean and cloaked their surroundings in a pink hue. Despite his best efforts, Tim found himself unable to take his eyes off Sharon. Graced by the sun's last majestic rays, she appeared even more beautiful to him. Some loose strands of her straight, chestnut brown hair gently brushed against her freckles. She had a slightly prominent jaw, which gave her the appearance of a model. Only her oversized black shirt, a washed-out friendship bracelet, and scrunchies struck him as quirky. However, it made her stand out.

Since his budding admiration threatened to disrupt his mental coherence, Tim decided to walk a few steps to regain focus. Whilst strutting two or three metres, he stumbled over a stick stuck into the ground. Shame overwhelmed him. The last thing he wanted was to appear clumsy in Sharon's eyes. "Bloody stick!" he scolded, picking it up and throwing it back into the sand. The intrusive swearing clashed with the scenic ambience and managed to capture Sharon's full attention. "Wait a minute, that's not a random stick," Sharon remarked, her voice tinged with scientific intrigue. "This must be a wand. It's finely crafted from maple wood, and look at these letters." Tim Meyer took a closer look, surprised at how his first glance had deceived him. "You might be onto something here. The first letter looks like a

window, and the other like a cross with wings." "I really can't tell what this inscription means, but one thing's for certain, we aren't alone on this island." A sense of unease accompanied his statement. Tim's worries seeped into Sharon's consciousness. "Oh darn, I hope our fellow islander is of a peaceful nature for once," she scolded.

With this puzzling new discovery, Sharon and Tim decided to spend the night in the apartment that had caught their interest earlier. The uncertainty over whether this unknown third party would reveal itself to be friendly or hostile lingered in their consciousness. It remained there as a worry, starkly contrasting with their picturesque surroundings. Even though the sun, with its unusual appearance, had already sunk into the ocean, the abundance of neon lights from the city and the countless stars in the night sky provided ample illumination. This blend of circumstances, finally setting foot in the incarnated version of an aesthetic he was fond of, and doing so in the company of a beautiful woman, would usually have overwhelmed him with glee, though something kept feeling off. Once they reached the apartment in question, the quizzical nature of its house number startled Tim. "Number 777, mmmh…" he mumbled. "Don't fall for this numerology nonsense," Sharon rebuked him as they entered the house and she shook her head in utter repute. "It's not like I'm opening this door and all of a sudden we're going to experience some leap of fate." Yet her statement aged badly, as the feared third party appeared just as she opened it.

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The cause of this sudden interruption was a young Asian woman, dressed in red cargo pants and a white hoodie, slightly cropped above her waist, with a vast array of pockets in various sizes. She wore a golden headband just below her hairline, and her hair was pulled back into a strict ponytail. "Calm down, Sharon. We don't know if she's friendly or not," Tim said, trying to ease the tension. He still held the mysterious wand in his hand. "Kimi ga watashi o tsukete kita wake ga nai, ima subete wa ushinawareta," the elusive woman uttered, her words tinged with undeniable desperation. She was about to draw a wand from one of the pockets on her belt, standing like an experienced gunslinger from the Wild West. Sharon Waterfield did her best to relax, forcing a welcoming smile. "I'm sorry, we don't speak your language. We're from the TFF, not the LNO." Fortunately, the young Japanese woman understood Sharon's words.

“What’s the TFF? Are you against the Lancers of the New Order?” she asked, her tension beginning to ease. “Indeed, we are a task force created specifically for the sole purpose of fulfilling the prophecy that has appeared in the dreams of many influential wizards and witches. I’m sure you’ve heard rumours about it.”

I’m not entirely sure how much I should reveal openly, but let’s just say we are on our mission.” The Japanese witch listened intently to this statement, and a relieved, exhausted sigh escaped her lips. “I’m familiar with this prophecy. For a long time, we Japanese witches believed we would remain distant from any trouble. For over 250 years, we’ve enjoyed a period of unprecedented peace and prosperity. Believe it or not, our orders back in the day weren’t known for being pacifists. One might say each of them tried to take over the island until we realised that none of our clans would ever be able to control it entirely, and chaos would prevail again. That’s when the Great Land Partition Act was enacted. The order I’m associated with handles affairs within the Mie prefecture. But then the LNO raided our base in Ise. Their attack was well prepared and deadly. Sharon’s interest was immediately piqued by the Japanese witch’s story. She couldn’t resist asking for more information, but she made sure to avoid sounding too interrogative, deciding instead to start slowly and politely. “That’s really intriguing. My name is Sharon, and my companion is called Tim. What’s your name?” “Sato Miko. In my culture the family name is stated first, so feel free to call me Miko. I hold the tragic claim of being the last member of the Weaving Foxes, former masters of the entirety of Mie, now an almost extinct clan.” “Do you have any idea why they specifically attacked your base? Any theories?” Tim Meyer asked.

Miko nodded thoughtfully. “I have a vague idea. Our main base, Shiroi Mahō, is located directly beneath the shrine complex venerating the sun goddess Amaterasu Ōmikami in Ise. Wouldn’t that be the perfect location for an entrance leading to the pillar of light?” “Indeed it would,” Waterfield responded. “That’s what the Lancers of the New Order theorised as well, but it’s simply not true given how obvious this would be. However, we do have an unexplored underground lake, which could possibly lead anywhere. Mages are seldom seafaring folk, which is why none of us really bothered to start a thorough

exploration of this water body." "So, it's never been explored or crossed?" Tim asked, his curiosity evident. "Well, at least this bloody serpent somehow made its way through the labyrinth of waterways." Sharon's eyes widened in a blend of shock and frustration. "Wait a minute, did you just incidentally say that they have a serpent, a bloody seadragon?"

"Oh yes, they do, and only God knows what else they have in store." Miko's reply was breathy, exasperated, and carried the tone of someone who'd seen far too much. "Their ground forces entered from above, and their serpent, with its ability to shoot projectiles of ice, attacked from below. It must have approached through some unexplored waterway. All of this happened during the night, and after two and a half centuries of peace, you might understand why we hadn't assigned anyone to guard duty. Now we've paid the price for our naivety." Tim Meyer glanced thoughtfully at the exotic wand in his hand and held it out to Miko. "Then this might belong to you, doesn't it?" The Japanese witch gladly accepted it, gripping the exquisite maple wood firmly. "It's been part of an experiment. Normally I should keep my mouth shut about any details, but as we're currently in the same boat, I'll explain. Even in peaceful times, we've always had some members eager to engage in research and experiments." Miko opened her palms to properly present the Japanese wand.

"One of our old and highly regarded scholars, Akihiro, theorised that dark magic could be dealt with most effectively by the force of brightness, by light. This wand was made from a branch of a maple tree we named 'The Ever Bright.' It has stood proudly for quite some time on top of a hill overlooking a valley. Since no other trees managed to take root around it, there's nothing to cast a shadow on it. Some people even believe it to be a land spirit. Those in need often go there to seek peace of mind. Not long ago, a small shrine was established nearby. The two letters carved into it are the kanji for the word sun." "I understand. It does sound like a coherent hypothesis," Tim Meyer replied, and began recounting his own encounter with a tree spirit. "You might be surprised, but we have a similar tree perched on the hillside overlooking our valley, though it's an oak. It even spoke to me. The land spirit is called Audun,

and without its advice, I wouldn't be here with Sharon." As Tim's words trailed off, Miko found herself taken aback by these unexpected revelations. "Spirits usually don't open themselves up to anyone without a reason, so you must play a vital role in this." This time, Sharon felt the urge to provide their new companion with some clarity.

"Since you've trusted us with secret information, let's enlighten you. I, Sharon Waterfield, am the involuntary vessel to fulfil the prophecy. Tim here is meant to assist me as a witch's paladin."
Sharon Waterfield took a seat next to a two-decade-old computer with its stereotypical creamy white colour and large screen. Her eyes, pensively fixed on the wand, pondered its importance.
"Blimey, we should keep a close eye on this wand. If Akihiro's hypothesis is correct, it's obviously a real game-changer." "That's why I kept it so close and felt like a failure when I somehow managed to lose it on the beach," Miko remarked. "Wait a minute," Tim interrupted insistently. "The real question is whether the LNO is aware of this wand. Let's assume they don't know about it yet, and that it really is some sort of wonder weapon against dark magic. Maybe, just maybe, it's even powerful enough to defeat Munrir himself." Miko made a thoughtful sound and began to move in a contemplative circle, considering their options. "Perhaps it could even be further enhanced if it's not powerful enough yet." "Those are all valid points," Sharon added. "Yet, I haven't even cast one bloody spell. Giving me such a high-performance tool of magic is really gallus." She paused, realising that neither Miko nor Tim might understand the last word she used. "I meant to say bold." "Gallus," Tim repeated with a subtle chuckle. "Sounds like a male chicken to me." "That would be a cockerel."

Their animated chatter fostered a sense of camaraderie between the three. However, Miko was still uninformed about the nature of Sharon's and Tim's personal relationship. "I don't know how strongly you're acquainted with each other, but I suppose you share the double bed whilst I occupy the couch."
Tim felt flustered and deeply overwhelmed at the prospect, whilst Sharon released a shocked gasp and blushed profoundly. "Can't we just take two apartments then?" she suggested desperately. "This place holds only one apartment with proper furniture and I strongly feel like we should stick together."

The timbre of Miko's resolute information sank in. Sharon turned her head right upwards to Tim. "Okay, seems like we have no other choice. You, mister, stick to your side. No smooching, no wandering hands at night, and especially no funny business." Tim expected nothing else from her. Sharon wasn't repulsed by Tim in the slightest, but she also had to save her face.

Chapter eight – Trivial Tribulations

After this eventful day, the second prophetic dream approached slumbering Tim. He instantly knew something involving Vanadis was bound to happen, as he watched his dreamscape transform into the distinctive Fen landscape, bathed in serene sunshine, with an endless variety of plants in their lush colours, and an atmosphere that made him feel undeniably welcome. "That's Vanadis' place, isn't it?" he mumbled to himself, just as the tall, mysterious woman appeared right behind him. "That's right, Tim Meyer. Good to see you again." Just as in their first encounter, Vanadis drew her wand and casually summoned two large, cosy armchairs. Tim took a seat, his face reflecting relaxation and camaraderie. "Good to see you as well. I have one question. Do you only exist in dreams, or will we ever meet in reality?" Vanadis adjusted her glamorous necklace and gave Tim an honest smile.
"Dreams and visions are a world of their own. Sometimes it's hard to draw a line, isn't it? We might encounter signs that make us question if we're truly awake or still sleeping." She avoided directly answering his question.

"Like the cloud-weaving woman I saw in the sky on my last day of vocational school. I assume that was you." Vanadis responded with a bright smile. "Not quite, but someone very similar to me. In fact, we do often get confused for each other." Her words trailed off as a tranquil wind rustled through a birch branch. "I hope you and Sharon are getting along well. From what I understand, you seem to make a very good team, or at least are about to become one. Yet your witch hasn't cast a single spell on her own so far, has she?" Tim Meyer's expression shifted to a more serious one. His first impression of magic had been

that it was a very complicated craft. “Well, to be quite honest, this old High Medieval spell work is even hard for a German person to memorise. I’m worried we’ll need an enormous amount of time to practise it.” Vanadis shook her head in disagreement. “Old High Medieval German is no longer necessary.”
She turned her gaze towards a scarily huge grey cat sitting on a low hovering cloud.

Tim Meyer found himself dumbfounded by the sheer size of the animal. “Your cat is gigantic, it's the size of a car! What breed is that even?” His supernatural counterpart reacted with mild surprise at his astonishment, almost as if having a cat of that size were the most normal thing in the world.
“Oh, they’re no different from any other cat, just a bit bigger.” “Just a bit,” Tim repeated sarcastically. “Aside from him, I also have a blue one. Both came to me as a present from a good friend of mine, Bjorn. I quickly learned to love them with all their quirks. This grey one, Biggy, for example, tends to purr so loudly that it makes the ground vibrate.” Vanadis snapped her fingers to get the enormous animal’s attention. “Biggy darling, would you mind handing me that rather modern spell book on the wardrobe?”
In response, Biggy let out a deep pant that sounded more like a Siberian tiger than an ordinary cat.

With unexpected skill for his cumbersome frame, Biggy nudged his large nose against the wardrobe, causing it to tilt. In a perfectly executed move, the book slid onto his nose. He turned to Vanadis, who picked it up and gently brushed through Biggy’s fur. “Well done, little one.”
She handed the book to Tim, who seemed captivated by its slick case, an elegant pairing of silver-tinted mystical symbols set against a pitch black background. He simply couldn’t resist opening it to take a first look. “I see, that’s dank,” he remarked. “These spells seem much shorter and easier to memorise than the ones I’ve encountered so far. It’s fascinating, they all consist of words from an ancient language.”
Vanadis pushed some of her red hair from her forehead and nodded vigorously, clearly pleased with Tim’s quick grasp of the material. “Exactly, it’s a language that hasn’t been in use for almost two millennia. The time around which...?” She paused, testing Tim’s knowledge. “The time around which Munrir was becoming susceptible to sunlight,” Tim finished. Vanadis gave him a thumbs up.

“Correctus! Besides that, it was also a period of much simpler spell work. Mages publicly casting spells or enchanting objects used to be a regular sight. We’ve always been a minority, but a prevalently respected one.”

A moody spark flickered in her blue eyes. She appeared akin to a person who had taken a deep dive into bittersweet nostalgia, accepting all the good and bad that had happened.
“After the infamous witch hunts, the open use of magic was strongly avoided and thus only practised behind closed doors. For a considerable period, the fostering of such close-knit, exclusive networks of magical orders caused decadence to spread widely. The inability to cast spells openly, combined with a lack of significant infighting, turned the craft into something akin to poetry, leading spells and incantations to become unnecessarily long. To be considered a gentleman or a lady within our magical society demanded theatrical wording and a remarkably sophisticated vocabulary.” Meanwhile, her gigantic cat Biggy stretched its limbs languidly and lay down, behaving no differently from any other cat. Tim Meyer listened to Vanadis’s words and reflected on them. “Perhaps it’s ironically a good thing that Sharon hasn’t learned any of such unnecessarily stretched spells yet.” He pointed to one spell in the book and quoted, “Freezing objects is done by visualising ice while saying ‘Frusna iz aisa’. It’s easy to remember and say quickly.” His eyes sparkled with newfound enthusiasm. “Thank you so much, this volume slaps and will definitely come in handy.”

“No need to thank me. This spell book is an exemplary, informative piece and absolutely vital for your and Sharon’s magical education. I must tell you that it’s already circulating. This means that the spells before you are currently in use by friends and…?” Once again, she left the sentence unfinished to test Tim’s ability to complete it. “And enemies.” Worry and anxiety washed over Tim, roughly reminding him that they would sooner or later find themselves facing competent and determined adversaries.
“She has to learn them quickly, we can’t always rely on others to save our backs.”

“Or bahookies, as she would say,” Vanadis mused, despite the seriousness of the situation.
“Well, Timofey, as much as I’d like to prolong this delightful for me and insightful for you conversation, reality demands your attention. Therefore…” Leisurely, she raised her hand to snap her fingers.
“You now will wake up.”

Tim Meyers’ breath caught as he felt the hardcover of a book between his fingers. He was holding a new spell book filled with refurbished old magic. Wonder and a mysterious veil of the metaphysical filled the air. This was the very first time the realm of dreams had intertwined with reality. His breath caught again, and mere seconds later, Sharon Waterfield woke up. The young witch blushed deeply, her face turning a shade of red that could rival BedirhanAlemdar’s during his anxious wait for his grades back in the classroom. A piercing gasp echoed across the room. Anyone familiar with their on-and-off relationship status and possessing a working pair of eyes would’ve instantly identified the reason behind Sharon’s abrupt awakening. Last night’s promise, which implied that each of them would strictly remain on their own side of the bed, had been ruthlessly broken, by none other than her. It must have been that Sharon’s body, subconsciously seeking closure and stability, had firmly embraced the innocuous Tim while resting her head on his chest. An image that resembled the position of two lovers more than that of two people abiding by a clear boundary. She retreated swiftly and was just about to shove the blame onto Tim, but realised that doing so would lack any logic, since Tim had decently stayed on his side. Instead, she allowed her attention to shift towards the new, quizzical book.

“Where did you get this from? I didn’t see it yesterday.” She let her hand gently glide over the book’s cover. “Such a well-crafted piece.” Tim Meyers, still slightly tired, yawned and rubbed some sleep from his eyes. He decided to leave their intimate closeness unmentioned. “Do you remember me talking about that woman who once visited me in my dream, living in that fen-like realm?” Sharon Waterfield nodded. “Sure, it rings a bell. The one who told you your life was about to change drastically. This tall witch, right?” “Correctus,” Tim replied. “She visited me again last night and basically gave me this spell book. We’re supposed to use it as our resource for learning magic. I haven’t the slightest clue how it’s

possible, and I can't quite wrap my mind around it, but this book has transcended from the dream into reality." The view of a juvenile potted palm tree opposite them gave him something to rest his eyes on while delving into hypothetical consideration. "Honestly…" Tim proclaimed after some silent seconds. "I think we shouldn't try to come up with any explanation for supernatural phenomena."

Sharon tilted her head, deliberately taking a moment to form her own opinion, and finally agreed with Tim. "I think that's the right approach, Tim. I mean seriously, just look around us. We're basically on some vaporwave island floating through an ocean in an alternative universe, hiding from an order of dark magic commanded by an evil giant. Perhaps we just have to live with that fact, as weird as it is."
At that exact moment, Miko, the last member of a Japanese magical order, stormed into the room, shocked and frightened. Miko's breath came in quick gasps, her voice nearly too frantic to form coherent words. "Stop dithering, you fools! A gigantic sea serpent is attacking us! We must get out of this place, away from this deceitful island's harmony!" The apartment quickly filled with an air of fear and a palpable urgency to act. Wordlessly, Tim and Sharon got dressed and gathered their few belongings. The trio assembled right behind the entrance door, its thin wood the only thing separating them from the danger looming outside. Before opening it, Tim decided to take the lead and quickly brief the two witches. "We need to get to the fridge as soon as possible, cross the portal and inform Richard that our 'trip' went awry." Miko and Sharon nodded at each other and at Tim. "That's the plan. Let's open the door and sprint," their newfound Japanese comrade suggested.

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The trio had no choice but to flee the building, though they couldn't help but feel helplessly dejected by the fearsome sight of the maritime monster. A throat more than 300 feet long, its skin covered in silver scales, stretched above the beach, with two large fins in the centre of its snake-like body. Its head resembled what one might imagine a dragon's to be. "This beast is enormous, but..." Tim stopped. Miko and Sharon looked at him, puzzled by his sudden moment of relief. "Blimey, we have to hurry! Why are we still standing here?!" Sharon shouted, grabbing Miko's and Tim's hands to drag them away, her Scottish accent thickening with the rising level of stress. "He can't reach us here, that's why," Miko

explained. Aggressively, and with a fierce intent to kill, the sea monster lunged but couldn't close half the distance towards the trio. Sharon began to relax, her internal tension easing. "You're right. It's huge, but not close enough to harm us." Tim gave Sharon a confident wink.
"We're safe here. As long as we stay away from the beach, we'll be completely safe."

He had barely finished his sentence before the serpent opened its mouth and spat out a yellow chunk the size of a gym ball, which landed a few yards away. A vending machine was hit and began to burn. The trio observed the fireball's impact on the machine. To their shock and surprise, it didn't look like something that had been burned, but rather like something etched away by acid. Close to them, a tall Greek statue perched in the centre of some greenery, contained within a circular frame. "Let's get behind this Greek statue!" Tim yelled. "We're so lucky to have found this statue of Zeus," Tim mumbled in utmost relief, only to be corrected by a know-it-all Miko. "That's Apollo, you uninformed bloke." One fireball after another was unleashed upon the tropical city, hitting lights, buildings and palm trees. They took cover behind the structure, which fortunately was large enough to completely conceal their location.

Amid the chaos, something within Miko snapped. She grabbed the powerful wand firmly, her eyes brimming with anger, frustration and hatred. "Enough is enough! This hideous, malicious being killed my brothers and sisters, now it has to pay. Time for vendetta." Sharon and Tim exchanged worried glances, unsure how to stop the furious Japanese witch from exposing their hideout. Miko squeezed her eyes shut in pure rage and aimed the wand directly at the serpent's head. "Moe yo!" she shouted.
A bright, powerful ray of light shot from the wand and struck the serpent in its eye. "Yes, you got it, girl!" Sharon cheered, while the serpent screeched in pain. "That must be one of those new shortened spells, seems like they're working in other languages too," Tim Meyer mumbled. With its remaining eye, the gigantic sea monster targeted Miko, making her tremble. "Bloody fishhook, what now?" Sharon exclaimed, clearly perturbed. "Shoot at it again!" Tim urged. The young Japanese woman gathered all her courage and aimed at the serpent once more. Before she could cast the spell, an enormous blue whale's head emerged from the sea with a force that sent large waves surging outward. For a few minutes, the

horizon was obscured by the whale's majestic snout. "That explains why the island moves, it's the back of a whale!" Sharon proclaimed. Meanwhile, the whale managed to capture the serpent's head and held it upwards in a triumphant pose. Tim twitched the skin on the back of his hand once more, just to make sure this wasn't all just a prolonged dream.

Unfortunately, those urgently needed seconds of relief didn't last long. In a mighty motion, the wale pushed its scaled opposite beneath the waves. The displaced masses of water had to move and formed a massive, foreboding wave not unlike a tsunami. Sharon, Miko and Tim instinctively reverted to their original plan and sprinted towards the mall. The sky darkened behind them, their hearts pounding with panic. This time, luck was finally on their side, as the mall was much closer than it had seemed before. Perhaps some buildings had changed position, which wouldn't be so unthinkable given this island's otherworldly nature. A simpler explanation might be that the nonchalant energy of the previous day had made the path appear longer, far less hasty. Almost out of breath, and with the fear of death lingering, they reached the mall's glass doors, which slid open to let them in. Its interior went unnoticed, as their only goal was to reach the unassuming fridge that might offer safety. "Come on, folks, we've almost made it!" Tim Meyer shouted, feeling hopeful. However, this would prove to be the wrong decision. Although they needed to enter a fridge to return to their own dimension, they had chosen the wrong one. Unbeknownst to them, Tim, Sharon and Miko stepped through the creamy white door and crossed the portal.

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The trio found themselves nearly surrounded by darkness, though a crack in the ceiling let in a stray ray of sunlight. "Wait a minute," Sharon said, her suspicion mounting. "This isn't the abandoned eighties hotel, it's a basement." "I'll bring some light to the situation," Miko confidently promised. With her mighty oriental maple wand, she cast the spell "Hikari o motarasu", which summoned a tiny floating source of light that quickly illuminated the room. Tim Meyer took a closer look and assessed their surroundings. To his right, wine barrels were stacked on top of each other. To his left, a shelf held an array of old and clunky tools. These tools seemed neither rusty nor broken, just unfamiliar to the modern eye.

He walked over to the wine barrels, admiring their rugged dark wood. “Eighteen hundred and ten... that must be an insanely expensive one. During that time, Napoleon was still alive.” Sharon’s suspicion began to infect Tim. Desperately, he tried to come up with a coherent explanation, though reality was about to catch up.

“For some reason, we took the wrong door and now find ourselves in some sort of wine cellar storing very old local beverages,” Tim said, delivering his conclusion with utmost confidence. Deeply rooted irritation over their unpredictable journey conjured an unmistakable display of discomfort on Sharon’s face. “This entire trip feels like a nightmarish loop. I’m so bloody jealous of all these lucky bastards living regular, calm lives.” A strong sense of discontent tinged her furious voice, emphasised by a following unnerved sigh. “Let’s get out of this house and see what’s next,” she suggested.
Rustic, uneven stone stairs led the trio out of the basement, a heavy wooden door separating it from the outside. As their new surroundings unfolded before them, brief moments of relief emerged, making their situation seem less worrying. Tim’s lips curled into a triumphant smile. “That’s Forstquelle’s spa bath! We’re finally lucky for once.” Sharon joined in the cheer, though hers was somewhat weary. “Yes, I remember it. This kind of structure is unmistakable, it’s really unique. I’m so glad this ordain is over.” Meanwhile, the Japanese witch Miko tugged at Sharon’s sleeve. “Folks, folks, how short-sighted can you be? Don’t you see it?” Scepticism quickly filled the air as realisation struck the two.

“Holy haystack…” Tim mumbled, his eyes wide with shock and confusion.
Indeed, they were still in Forstquelle, Kühltal’s neighbouring town, known for its healing springs. But it wasn’t 2015. It was the early industrial era. Tim Meyer recognised the setting from old photographs and paintings of the region from that time. A well in the centre of the town was frequently used by people in old-fashioned clothing. One could tell their social class by their attire: some wore coats and top hats, while others had rags that looked like they dated back to the 1700s. Many children were barefoot.

Tim felt as though he had been transported into a Charles Dickens tale, if it had taken place in southern Germany. As he looked at the hillsides, he realised that many streets and rows of houses didn't exist yet. The areas on the edge of the forest were occupied by fields and shepherds with their herds of sheep and goats. It took him a moment to process the situation, and he nervously tilted his head, signalling to Miko and Sharon to retreat into the wine cellar.

"I don't know much about history, Tim, but one thing's for certain: this is not our era," Sharon remarked, her voice sounding weary and annoyed. Miko remained thoughtfully silent, as she had been the first to realise it. Tim had already grown familiar with Sharon's sensible nature. He knew that if there was a hard-hitting reality that Sharon must be confronted with, he had to deliver it in a calm and considerate manner. That's why he invited her to take a seat on an ancient hand-churned chair with a friendly gesture. "Sharon, my witch, you must have heard about the era when Queen Victoria reigned, the period some decades after Napoleon." The young Scottish witch leaned into the chair's humble comfort, deep in her own thoughts, wishing for nothing more than to go home and live her normal life again.
"Yes, I do. Industrialisation, colonialism, the early days of electrification, and big differences in social classes. I've heard about it. We're in that period now, right?" "Right," Tim confirmed.

Meanwhile, the Japanese witch Miko was drawing her own conclusions. "Guys, we need to get different clothes as soon as possible. The three of us would attract far too much attention in our current outfits." "Why, though? Let's just leave the same way we came," Tim confidently suggested.
"Brilliant plan, Sherlock," Sharon interrupted, sounding increasingly unsettled and irritated. "If there was a door or entrance to begin with. Look behind you, would you? There simply isn't one, and we might be trapped here forever." This possible outcome was the last straw for Tim Meyer, leaving him without a plan. His ever-present fear of failure clung to him like an unbidden shadow. Unexpectedly, Miko, known for her serious nature, broke the silence with a touch of witticism. "Well, you two could start a farm here or move to America, and I'll try my luck in the Tokugawa shogunate. Or, as I already suggested, we could

get new clothes and at least try to find an exit. Where there's a will, there's a way!" Her optimism eased Tim's and Sharon's earlier worry, their faces slightly softening. "Miko's right," Sharon agreed in an unforeseeable turn of spirit. "We have to go back to where we came from. It's not our century."
Tim nodded and said in a more serious tone, "Let's not forget about the butterfly effect. Our impact here must be limited to the bare minimum."

Chapter nine – Agent Rockstar

While Miko, Sharon and Tim desperately tried to find their way back to their timeline, Martin Fink sat in his apartment at the southern end of Kühltal, occupied with a task no one expected him to be doing. As the offspring of a long line of highly esteemed and respected wizards, Martin was no stranger to the key principle of maintaining secrecy about the greater magical community. Yet during these momentous days, the responsibility of keeping another secret hidden had been placed upon his shoulders. Just like Lopt, Richard, and more recently Sharon and Tim, Martin too was a member of the TFF, albeit unofficially. His task was to keep a close eye on his comrades during every action their mission required, without raising any suspicion. The strategy behind this was to safeguard Sharon, Tim, and the plan as a whole from interference by the LNO. It was highly probable that the Lancers intended to sabotage the prophecy through infiltration, kidnapping or even assassination. Being a regular citizen of Kühltal and a close friend of Tim gave him the advantage of appearing as an uninvolved bystander. If any suspicious element happened to follow the two, Martin would have noticed with the help of his own raven and the cameras attached to it. At least, that was the theory. Reality had shown otherwise. Tim had been followed and nearly frozen by a spell, not to mention Sharon's capture. One instance had been the result of Martin's misjudgement about how long it would take him to get from the outdoor cooking spot to his home. The other had occurred, ironically, due to their lack of transparency with the other TFF members. It all frustrated him deeply, as he wanted nothing more than to be a worthy contributor to wizard society.

The lack of a centralised academy for witchcraft in Germany meant magicians were forced to educate their children at home. This predicament gave rise to an entirely new and unique approach to magical education: the three-rank system. In order to reach each rank, students had to prove their skills and knowledge to an examiner designated by the secret district's administration.

In order to graduate the first rank, called 'Initiated', one had to be familiar with the fundamental spellwork, alongside guidelines concerning proper concealment and the basics of potion brewing. The second rank, 'Staffwielder', required advanced spellwork and potion brewing, wizard ethics, the enchantment of objects, and knowledge about the other universes one could step into. Lastly, the rank 'Master', as it already implies, demanded complete mastery of the previous subjects plus shape-shifting and a vision quest. In a vision quest, the wizard enters a highly meditative state where visions and breaking insights tend to surface. Due to the unpredictable nature of visions, the examiner could only determine whether the candidate had entered the meditation properly.

This was where Martin, two years prior, had broken his family's tradition. For centuries, every male ancestor of his had risen to the rank of Master, whilst he was, even after multiple attempts, unable to enter the vision quest. Subsequently, he felt shame, as he perceived it as a dishonour to his family. Henceforth, he sought to restore their legacy. His father, August, brought him into the TFF with the idea in mind that saving the daylight was a far more heroic action than holding certificates alone. But now that the entire surveillance operation had proven ineffective, Martin lived in constant fear of yet another terrible failure. Therefore, he had requested an appointment with his High Staffwielder at the task force's secret base, which was due to take place in half an hour. He sensed that the current strategy caused more harm than good. As mental support, he had adopted a tiny black cat and named her Connie, who now jumped onto his desk and released a contented meow. She was the only one he could fully open up to. To his left, a window offered a view of the main road, in front of him were four monitors, and on his right sat a small fan. It had been a warm and humid day. A big glass of sparkling water sat nearby, a retreat into

something fresh and cold. Martin took a mouthful, but it wasn't enough to calm him. He stood up and observed the unburdened, summery landscape outside whilst stroking his feline companion. One person outside seemed talented enough to perform an exemplary breakdance. Martin threw a sorrowful glance at Connie. "I wish I was that talented in my field. You'll be alone for an hour, my friend. I'll cut it short," he announced, before preparing himself to leave.

Martin closed his apartment door behind him and descended the staircase connecting his chamber with the outside world. His glance danced over the perfectly even, pitch-black steps of the staircase, with their 1970s white-dotted pattern. After closing the estate's door, the first thing he saw was his black Ford Fiesta. An undoubtedly inconspicuous vehicle, its modesty made it perfect for remaining unnoticed. The TFF headquarters' location required him to drive through the forest. Martin thought it would be best to move in complete invisibility. Therefore, he had to park his car behind the first thick line of trees, which concealed him from the public eye. Simply applying a bottle of invisibility potion would do the job, though he quickly noticed that the potion's bottle was much too small to be poured all over the car. One of the highly advanced charms would suffice. He drew his wand, made of stainless steel. A friend of his, François Weilande from the bordering region in France, had crafted it for him. His friend had equipped the wand with a useful feature. At first glance, it appeared rather small and easy to hide, but it was extendable, like a telescope. Martin extended the wand, aimed it at his car, and spoke:
"Swe drobaz du mariz, swe seedalaz du trewaz, grow." With a clear picture painted in his mind, the bottle grew to twice its size. Carefully, he rinsed the liquid over the Ford and himself. Now invisible, he drove along an unpaved dirt road into the woods.

#

A rustic wooden cottage, standing alone amidst fields and a barbeque area and bordered by a hiking path, held more than its initial appearance suggested. Once, it had stood within a small village situated on top of a low ridge mountain near Kühltal. As quick access to water, electricity and sewerage connections became standard, people moved away to nearby settlements that provided comparably

modern conditions. This cottage not only survived the village's abandonment but also became a popular destination for hikers, offering local food, with blueberry cake being the most iconic example. Dennis's uncle, Fricco Stamm, ran this establishment. To the surprise of many, he was also a member of Task Force Fir. Recent tensions had drastically increased activity within the high command, and Fricco had no choice but to temporarily close the hut for "general maintenance."

Martin parked his vehicle just behind a nearby stack of firewood, beside a wooden box containing an array of camouflage nets. Despite their non-magical nature, camouflage nets were a vital necessity for concealing any task force's vehicle, since invisibility potion doesn't last longer than seventeen minutes. On hot days, it fades even faster, as it evaporates more quickly. However, rain and humidity increase its effectiveness. Both the LNO and the TFF engaged in surveillance operations so thorough they would make any Cold War-era intelligence agency blush. Neither side could be certain whether the opposition was gathering information on vehicle ownership. An enemy raven could easily have tracked any member of the fellow orders to obtain such details. Now that the seventeen minutes had passed, Martin and his car were visible once more. Without delay, he swiftly threw one of the nets, threaded in a pattern resembling the nearby needle trees, over the Ford.

Seven minutes stood between Martin Fink and his anticipated meeting. To recall every point he wished to raise, Martin used the time to regain focus. His mind was clouded with burdens and worry, so meditation seemed a sensible option. Confronting an existential threat, such as a fanatical adversary bent on seizing power, even if it meant destroying the planet by dimming the sunlight, demands two crucial attributes: calmness and logical thinking. This is especially true when the adversary is a malevolent order of dark magic, commanded by a giant whose sole desire is to be worshipped as a god, regardless of the cost. Martin sat cross-legged, closed his eyes, and allowed his lingering emotions to pass. Slowly yet noticeably, the thoughts tormenting him began to ebb away, making room for renewed clarity. When he

opened his eyes again, the picturesque scenery reappeared: wide fields, vibrant green, full of colourful butterflies and bees hovering above. An old walnut tree stood beside a fireplace encircled by stones, like old friends gathered in good company. The expansive forests stretched far beyond the line of sight, though the foremost trees appeared to pause respectfully at the edge of the field, as if acknowledging the open space's right to exist. Fluffy clouds drifted across the sky, and a mild wind brushed against him, a gentle reminder that it was time to go.

Invigorated and full of determination once more, he entered the hut, deliberately empty of tourists due to "general maintenance." The secret entrance, concealing the headquarters, was a fine piece of old mechanics. A cuckoo clock, typical of the Black Forest, served as the opener. Martin pulled exactly seven times on its right cone, attached to a string. The wall behind it moved backwards with the noisy creaking of old, heavy wood and then disappeared into a slot in the ground. It was not entirely certain who had invented this mechanism. Fricco himself believed it might have been one of the Kühltal skiing hut owner's ancestors, known locally for crafting such intricate machines. Martin stepped through the door, well accustomed to the highly professional setup. There he sat, Theo, the Task Force's leader, a man who stubbornly refused to replace his old-fashioned robe and classic pointy wizard's hat with modern clothing. A middle-aged man with a braided brown beard and tall stature, he also avoided speaking about his upbringing and background. When the White Magic's Defensive Alliance searched for a suitable leader for the TFF, Theo had to prove himself countless times to earn their trust. His unshakeable sense of justice, mastery over his emotions, fierce discipline and unwavering willingness to sacrifice himself for the wellbeing of others had brought Theo to this position. During a risky battle with the most fearsome members of the New Order's Lancers, he had lost his right hand, now replaced by a prosthesis with an integrated watch. His indomitable will to fight was fuelled by his sense of belonging to the international community of magic folk. He clearly understood the importance of preserving the world's harmony. Martin Fink saw him as a great role model and dreamed of being like him one day, a distant wish for someone already burdened with so much responsibility.

Martin Fink began the conversation with, “Good day, sir.” Tho, just finishing evaluating some tracking information, rose from his office chair. “I’m glad to see you, Agent Rockstar,” he replied, his deep voice tinged with trustworthiness. “Well, the day is not that good, is it? Otherwise you wouldn’t have asked for a meeting so urgently. How is operation ‘occultum aspectum‘ going, did it bear any fruits? Do we know who’s the perpetrator behind those kidnapping attempts? What have you found out, Martin?”

Martin cleared his throat before reporting. A seat next to Theo’s executive chair offered some badly needed comfort, so he sat down as an exhausted breath slipped from his lungs.
“Operation occultum aspectum turned out to be an utter debacle. Our secrecy from the others ironically didn’t give us the edge of surprise, yet it greatly hindered any proper intel gathering.”
Martin’s gaze dropped to the surface of the table, clearly betraying the shame he felt for failing his superior. “During the first incident, Tim narrowly escaped a freezing spell cast on him. We had such unadulterated luck that two locals distracted the witch long enough. “One week later, on Friday the seventeenth at eighteen hundred hours, two unidentified male subjects captured Sharon Waterfield. Their route was successfully tracked with the help of our raven, B747. Unfortunately, Lopt’s raven, ‘Sky Eye’, mistook B747 for an enemy bird and managed to rob him of his talking device. As we already know, Slygod and Tim rescued her and managed to completely evade the LNO’s detection.”

The brown-bearded wizard frowned thoughtfully, his eyes filled with worry and contemplation. “For someone as essential as Tim Meyer and Sharon Waterfield to be saved purely by coincidence is a disaster. Audun signalled Tim to visit him solely through telepathic waves, and Sharon was only there due to visions she kept receiving in her dreams. Both methods are mind-to-mind exchanges that only high spirits can manage. How did they even know he was at the outdoor cooking spot in the first place, and the exact time he headed homewards? Do we at least have any facial recognition of the witch in question?”
Sadly, Martin had to decline. “Our raven could hardly see anything. The only reason we have any

information about these incidents is through local retellings. At least our raven could confirm seeing a female figure being pushed into the river. Although I have to add that the second mishap at the festival clearly stemmed from the lack of transparency with our fellow Task Force members. In fact, Lopt's quick countermeasure against our raven, which they wrongly perceived as a threat, was actually the correct reaction. Lopt's raven simply wasn't familiar with mine, and so judged him to be an enemy."
Martin concluded his report while Theo appeared deeply contemplative. He intertwined his unharmed hand with his prosthetic, allowing his forehead to rest upon them.

"It's clear that there must be a spy among mine and Tim's friends, yet we lack any hint as to who it could be. We must inform our fellow wizards that we are monitoring them, otherwise the chain of mishaps will likely continue," Martin said. Theo couldn't contain a thoughtful yet still clueless "Mmmh." "On one hand, keeping them oblivious to our investigation does limit the chances of the snitch finding out about it. On the other hand, the lack of communication has proven utterly ineffective in hindsight."
Fink listened carefully to each of his superior's words, trying to catch a hint of a possible upcoming decision. Unfortunately, Theo remained trapped in his own thoughts. "Excuse my tone, sir, but there isn't any room left for lukewarm indecisiveness. We had a strategy, but it's been fruitless. We have to change it. Let's abandon occultum aspectum and replace it with 'viribus unitis', a fitting name for a cooperative approach."

Task Force First Commander Theo stood up and walked over to one of the many monitors. He opened a new window and typed in a password. On the opposite side of the room, cold steam hissed out of an open drawer. He walked over and carefully took out a well-crafted and finely decorated casket, placing it gently onto the table. "What's that?" Martin Fink asked, his curiosity piqued more than ever before. Theo suddenly appeared more serious, trustworthy, and competent as he revealed the casket's secret: a human skull surrounded by smaller bones. "These are the last remains of a man who was considered a hero in our region more than two thousand five hundred years ago, called Ailill Belenus. During those times, practitioners of magic lived side by side with others, as well as plenty of mysterious

beasts. Some claim he was an elf, others deny it. But regardless of whether he was human or not, he performed a great deed for those who once inhabited this valley. An Ice Giant, known as Cormac, would rise from the swamp's frozen lake each winter and steal the people's food reserves. Many died of hunger and malnourishment. No warrior seemed strong enough to defeat him until Ailill, at the young age of sixteen, enchanted a spear with an incantation that turned its blade into a constantly blue-burning flame. Cormac met his demise, and Ailill attained the status of a true legend and hero." Martin Fink absorbed the tale like a sponge. It was the first time he had ever heard it.

"That's a thrilling saga, and the hero's name, combined with its historical context from the time when the Celts had their settlements here, adds some credibility, but…" He paused, his expression confused. "How can these two-and-a-half-millennia-old bones help us in our own endeavour?"
"Each district of our world has its own community of magicians, who not only have their own structures but also their own rituals and, to some extent, even beliefs," Theo began to explain. "As you know, the TFF is a task force created solely to fulfil the prophecy and resolve the threat Munrir poses. Before that, a group called 'Well of the Three' reigned over our region. Once it became evident that our cause was vastly more important than local ties, everyone, including them, agreed to hand the northern Black Forest over to us. In return, the Well of the Three were granted the Franconian town of Nurnberg." Martin's attention remained unwavering, patiently awaiting the final answer. "Whenever a significant problem arose, they performed a ritual that demanded great focus." Theo draped his fingertips over the casket's ornamented edge and began to stare at the displayed bones. "Just do the same as I do and let your thoughts flow. We must continue until an idea sparks within one of our minds."

Martin Fink's mind was now completely vacant of self-initiated thoughts. Mere minutes later, he felt an energetic jolt rush through him, and a distant childhood memory reappeared with startling clarity. The meditative silence was about to be broken. Martin carefully adjusted his words, knowing every hint could hold significance. "During my childhood, plenty of movies, books and games inspired by wizardry appeared. The vast majority of people sternly believed that such things could never exist in our world. For

some reason, I sensed a distant understanding from Tim. He seemed more open to the unexplainable. Perhaps he grasped hints that others missed. All of my ancestors rose to master-rank magicians. If there was one thing I learned right from the start, it was to retain absolute and indisputable secrecy about anything related to witchcraft. Now, even though I have a friend familiar with it, I still have to remain silent, purely to shield a secret within a secret. The urge to open up to someone kept growing. I've adopted a cat with eyes that speak of a similar faint understanding. I do tell this tiny feline a lot, which helps, but that can't be a long-term solution."

With utmost surprise, Theo's ears clung to every word Martin uttered. Performing this ancient ritual was something he perceived as a last resort, so he hadn't placed much hope in it. Against his expectations, he ended up sharing the same sentiment as his inferior. "What I'm about to tell you is an excerpt from my own experiences, which I've kept a personal secret until now." Theo presented his finely crafted prosthesis to Martin. "I lost this hand to a werewolf attack launched by the Lancers. You have to understand that despite their destructive nature, those sad individuals were once regular wizards like you and me. Turning someone into a werewolf demands the permanent breaking of their will and an array of enchantments designed to corrupt their shape-shifting ability. There are certain commands that trigger this ingrained werewolf instinct. During this stage, they're nothing but mindless robots, adherent to their abusers' words. Their social life is no longer a factor. These people most often find themselves isolated and misunderstood." A rush of sympathy for the victims of such a procedure overwhelmed Martin. He waited for his commander's concluding words. "Integrity is a value often overlooked and held in less regard than the attitude of being the unpredictable lone wolf. Let integrity be our strength. You're free to cease operation 'occultum aspectum' and launch 'viribus unitis'." Theo trusted in the outcome of the old ritual and allowed him to contact the yet unknown Tim Meyer via a Broomracer 101 message.
Instead of using one of the headquarters' devices to inform Tim, Martin decided to return home first. Overflowing with determination and the will to act, he rushed homewards.

#

As soon as he was inside his own space, he told his seemingly innocent cat Connie about the meeting's outcome. Martin Fink retrieved a phone from his pocket and sat down at his chair. Martin's fingers were ready to type the decisive message and send it to Tim. But suddenly, a masked witch stood there in place of his feline companion, aiming a wand at him. Hectically, with eyes agape and filled with panic, he reached for his wand in exasperated hopes he would be fast enough to charm a shielding spell. Though his efforts were in vain, as the witch was faster and froze him into ice. Motionlessly, he sank to the floor. The witch left Martin's apartment and the building, gaining some safe distance before pressing a small trigger connected to an explosive charge, which turned the estate into rubble.

Chapter ten – Escaping the past

Miko, Sharon, and Tim were still helplessly stuck in the old wine cellar and urgently needed a plan to find their way back to their own time. Tim Meyer, deeply immersed in his role as a witch's paladin, paced back and forth in the chilly, cramped room. An ornament consisting of diagonally interconnected lines caught his attention. For a short moment, he struggled to form any coherent reason why fate had led him and his companions into such a weird predicament. Tim kept sauntering until an idea finally struck him. "The old spa building!" he exclaimed, his voice brimming with euphoria, triumph and self-assurance. "Guests need somewhere to store their clothing inside the bath. We just need to find a way to sneak in and grab something suitable." Miko, meanwhile, began rummaging through the equipment on her belt and pulled out a small glass potion bottle. Her quick thinking was crucial to the plan. "With this little bottle, I can stay invisible for seventeen minutes. That should be enough time to get inside and find us some outfits." "Brilliant!" Sharon shouted, adding in cautiously budding hope, "You should get us some coats, hats and dresses. We don't need to steal anything unnecessary, just need to blend in. "Miko cast a serious glance at her team. "Right, I'll do it." She opened the tiny bottle and poured it over herself like shampoo. Carefully, to avoid drawing attention, she slowly and quietly opened the basement door.

Tim was about to find himself alone with Sharon for at least a quarter of an hour. This unscripted moment initially began rather silent as neither of the two uttered a single word, though in stark contrast to his external wordlessness, his mind was as loud as it could be. Tim was very deft at side-eyeing people. At first glance, his gaze seemed focused on the basement's uneven stairs leading upwards, yet Sharon's shape at the corner of his eye was his real point of interest. Once in a while, Tim felt drawn to some women, but only on a very superficial level during a very short period of time.

As simple as it was for him to detach himself from such short-lived emotions, he now found himself entirely unable to escape the air of feminine grace Sharon radiated. The sometimes sassy, other times gentle and caring nature of this Scottish witch had captured Tim's feeble heart with ease. Even though there were possibly thousands of women resembling Sharon, she undoubtedly stood out to him. Something set her apart. The mere thought of another man possibly entering her life as a partner who wasn't him tore his soul apart and made his heart bleed. Yet the only feasible way to win Sharon's favour was to go through the necessary motions and throw his godforsaken shyness around flirting into the bin. All those years of missed opportunities to familiarise himself with relationships and love loomed over him like a dark cloud. Tim suffered in silence, though while he trudged through this shadowed valley of catching up, a faint light appeared in the distance. Still admiring her presence from the corner of his eye, he ironically caught her in the act of staring. A joyous smirk played on his lips, holding a sincerity that couldn't be faked. It was up to him now to either go in and try gallantly or keep blaming himself afterwards. "Looks like somebody's glancing at me from the side. I can see you in the corner of my eye." Sharon felt a wave of embarrassment at being so bluntly caught in the act. Her cheeks glowed in a crimson shade too strong to be glossed over, and her hazel orbs glimmered coyly. "Oh, don't give it too much credit, I tend to stare at people from time to time." Tim couldn't help but chuckle at her odd statement, and Sharon, well, she felt outraged by her awry attempt at an explanation.

To her unexpected rescue, Miko, their Japanese witch companion, stormed back into the basement, holding a bundle of old-fashioned yet currently fitting attire. Palpable annoyance was easy to spot in her demeanour. “Couldn’t you have warned me that people bathe naked there? I saw things I would’ve been perfectly fine not to,” she scolded Tim, irritated. “Well, at least you had enough time to ponder our next step, right?” Tim and Sharon looked at each other, clueless and sheepish. As a matter of fact, the two had managed to waste seventeen minutes in internal reflection, ending in a mildly awkward situation. Tim, with little credibility to his statement, remarked, “Well, we’ve considered some options.”

Now Tim’s mind entered as the unexpected saviour, with a speed that made it seem as though it had done the planning all on its own, not too farfetched a thought. His voice had a hint of a know-it-all tone, though he hadn’t quite earned that level of confidence. “Now that we can finally move unobtrusively, things become much easier. The fact of the matter is, we’re unaware of another portal or where it might be located.” Raising his index finger like a scientist presenting his latest thesis, Tim paced in slow, contemplative circles. “Nevertheless, we do have an ally, Audun, the old oak’s spirit. The tree is a few hundred years old. We should be able to reach out to him.” Miko patted his shoulder enthusiastically. “Not a half-bad plan. We should get into these clothes and waste no more time.” “Agreed,” Sharon added, trying on a Weddington blouse paired with a walking dress. Their Japanese companion chose a similar outfit, but added a straw hat. Tim Meyer opted for a brown sack coat, ordinary trousers, and a simple worker’s cap. “Ready to rumble, spiffy squad?” he asked the other two and earned two nods.
“Just to be sure, let’s talk to no one and change nothing. It’s the only way to avoid the butterfly effect,” Miko emphasised once more.

#

Leaving the old cellar felt like a liberation for the trio. Passing along Forstquelle’s main road revealed quite the irony. Despite having fewer inhabitants, houses, and businesses, the city felt far more vibrant, filled with lively street life. Each house was thoroughly occupied by one or more families, mothers appearing completely accustomed to providing for countless children. Farmers sold their goods

in the main square, several shops had their doors wide open for customers, and the street buzzed with animated chatter. Yet, the darker side of this era didn't escape their notice. Poor folk passed by, dressed in tattered attire. Elderly people, wrinkled and visibly exhausted, still had to work to survive. Gaps in the cobblestone road were filled with dust and dirt. Miko, Tim, and Sharon deliberately kept a brisk pace. A number of buildings stood out to Tim, striking him as familiar, he recognised them from his own time. Apparently, those structures had weathered far more seasons than he'd expected. Sharon, also mesmerised by this living, breathing museum of the eighteen hundreds, inadvertently bumped into another person.

"Kosch ned ufbasse du bloder." A local with a moustache, clad in a blacksmith's apron, scolded her with utter annoyance. Sharon was left with her mouth agape as she found herself caught in a very difficult situation. Not only were her lacklustre German skills not adequate to understand the thick local accent, the pressing need to form a proper apology without a trace of her Scottish accent muted her. So Tim stepped in to apologise, while Miko feigned involvement, since a Japanese person in a rural early Victorian setting would raise even more suspicion. The least possible amount of time had to be spent in this era; every action could have caused significant changes in their own time. Eventually, they crossed the town. A simple dirt road connected Forstquelle with Kühltal. Tim Meyer mused on how his own hometown might look. Given that Forstquelle always held more significance, Kühltal might be nothing more than a tiny hamlet. At that very moment, Sharon Waterfield shared the same thought. With her witty, light voice, she offered her hypothesis to him. "Your village might be much more than just a loose collection of farms, a school, and a town hall. Even as I can hardly imagine it being even more backwater than I know it to be." He responded with a soft, humble smile, silently confirming Sharon's theory. "Maybe add some small businesses like a blacksmith, a bakery, and if we're really generous, a manufactory."

Once more, Tim sank into his thoughts, walking along the road, lost for words. Hopefully, Lopt Slygod was playing his role at home accordingly. Had the lancers of the new Order given up on their

pursuit, or would they be waiting for them when they returned? How were his friends doing at home? A nervous rush of worry washed over him as he considered the possibility that they might be targeted as well. Tim Meyer shook it off, knowing that expecting the worst wouldn't be helpful at all. Instead, his thoughts drew towards the impressions he had gathered from Victorian Forstquelle. There was an old cemetery consecrated during that period. At least some of the people he had just seen walking upon the cobblestone streets must have been the ones remembered by their names on weathered gravestones in his time. He pondered established theories about the afterlife and wondered if those souls had already been reborn countless times, or if they might exist in an entirely different realm.

#Kühltal was far quainter than Forstquelle. An array of farms of various sizes and production dominated the landscape. In the fields, some farmers observed their crops, while others fed their animals or harvested hay for them. All of them were connected to the main dirt road. The bridge, where shortly before the river light festival an enemy witch had been pushed into the water, was also present, though it was constructed differently. Taking in their new surroundings, the trio stopped to get an overview. Sharon Waterfield pointed to the left along the river, where Tim's home would later be situated. Astonishment was evident in her voice. "Look, there's a blacksmith over there, and a mill not far off. If you dig in your garden, you might find some old nails, hammers or horseshoes." Tim chuckled, amused. "Remind me to borrow a metal detector once we've made it back." Meanwhile, Miko squinted her eyes to zoom in as best as her vision would allow. "There's a big oak in the distance, that might be Audun, right?"
Tim followed her gaze. "Yep, that's definitely him. Even the path is already there. Ladies and gentlemen, we are one step closer," he proclaimed festively. Strictly adhering to the principle of not touching, changing or speaking to anyone or anything, the companions made their way along the dusty dirt road. That is, until Miko stepped on the end of a pitchfork, causing it to jump upwards, nearly hitting her in the face. Stressed and angry, she grabbed the tool and hissed a silent "Baka." Fuelled by rage, she rammed it into the ground, disconnecting the metal end from its wooden shaft. "Didn't we agree on not touching anything?" Sharon Waterfield grumbled bitterly, dragging her companion back onto the track.

The trio made their way up the valley, passing by a sheep meadow where Tim's school would normally be situated. Those fields were separated by small, sturdy stone walls, overgrown with an abundance of herbs and flowers, beaming with their rich, colourful variety. Now, only a few yards stood between them and the old oak's spirit. One of the trio's most decisive moments was soon about to take place. Would Audun be there to aid Tim and Sharon, or would they face a tragic turn of fate, leading them to be forever stuck in the Victorian era? Nervousness and uncertainty lingered upon the three like an unbidden shadow, building up with each step that drew them closer to the old oak's spirit.

"Audun, spirit of the old oak, I know it sounds odd, but we're from the future, stuck in the past. Would you be so kind as to help us return to our time?" Several seconds of nerve-wracking silence followed, until the tree finally creaked, just like the first time Tim had spoken with him. His voice sounded exactly the same as it had in 2015. "You three radiate something that speaks of misplacement. I can also sense that you're in the companionship of two witches, am I right?" Tim nodded along, uttering an unmistakable, "Correct." "Then indeed, there is a solution. One can create a portal for time travel, but it requires a material sacrifice and powerful spellwork." Tim closed his eyes, his demeanour marked by evident relief. "What a pleasant surprise, a way back to our own time. Allow me to ask, what do we need to offer, and which spell do we cast?" A mild wind rustled through the old oak's leaves, providing a refreshing break from the humid summer heat. "For the offering, one must let go of an item from the era they wish to return to. The more emotional significance it holds for the practitioner, the more secure the outcome shall be." Tim turned to his two companions, speaking honestly. "To be quite frank, I don't really have anything with me that I'd be sad to lose. I'm sorry, folks, it might be up to one of you."

Sharon looked burdened as she gazed into Miko's dark brown eyes. The Japanese witch returned the look with a similar expression. She retrieved a golden ring engraved with oriental patterns from her bag. "This is a ring that one of our most highly regarded scholars, Akihiro, was about to enchant. He told me about it just one day before the LNO attacked our base. This piece might look old, but it was forged

just a few months ago. It's one of the last remaining items of our order." Sharon struggled internally as she removed a silver bracelet from her arm. Her usual self-absorbed nature had to pass for a selfless approach. "This is a farewell gift from one of my best friends back in Edinburgh. It means a lot to me, but it can't compare to your ring. It would be disgracefully selfish to let you lose one of your order's last remnants." Miko's eyes began to sparkle, filled with gratitude for Sharon's understanding.
Tim turned back to the old oak. "Well, that's settled. Now, tell us about the necessary spell," he said, his words brimming with enthusiasm as the old spirit was about to answer. "You don't even need my help to gather information about it, if you have a proper spellbook, that is."

"We do have this specimen here," Sharon stated as she dragged her backpack out from under her Weddington blouse. Eagerly, Sharon Waterfield's fingers flicked through the book. "Protectoral barrier, resisting curses, time portals... there it is!" she announced with feigned confidence. Beneath the superficial layer of her acting, Sharon's heart was anxiously thrumming. During her time at university, she had stumbled across some subjects more demanding and harder to comprehend than others. Now she had to perform the ineffable act of summoning a portal for time travel. Not only Audun, with his enigmatic instincts, noticed that looming insecurity. Tim felt the ache behind Sharon's hazel eyes and longed for nothing more than to shield her within a comforting embrace. Unbeknownst to him, she had already noticed his budding sympathy for her. For a fleeting moment their gazes interlocked, after letting out an exhausted sigh, she decided to continue. "First, we need to draw a large circle on the ground with a wand, seven times clockwise since it belongs to the harmonising category of witchcraft. Inside it, an array of symbols has to be written."

"Wait a minute, my witch." Tim placed his hand on Sharon's arm to gain her attention. She blushed deeply at the unbidden touch. "That strikes me as a rather intricate kind of magic. You've never cast a spell before. Let's at least conjure a simpler one as a warm-up." Miko stepped forward, readjusting her strict, backwards-drawn ponytail. "Luckily, you have me, with proper proficiency in spell work, sister. Take the maple wand." Sharon reached out and accepted the finely crafted piece, her eyes lingering on it

as if trying to pierce through it with her gaze. Her stark insecurity didn't go unnoticed by the Japanese witch, which emboldened her to provide even more guidance. "Once, I heard an analogy about sword fighting. I can't quite recall where exactly I picked it up, but apparently it applies to wands and staffs as well. You have to treat a sword, or in this case, your wand, like an extension of your arm, allowing it to move with you, not against you." Sharon folded her fingers around the wand, gripping it firmly yet refraining from squeezing it. "That's braw! It does feel more ergonomic. Now tell me what to do next." Miko picked up their helpful piece of literature and searched for the northern European version of the illumination charm. "There we go."

"This one turns your wand into a flashlight. It's crucial to avoid any internal contemplation. You need to visualise the intended outcome. Imagine a beam of light extending from your wand and say 'skinan brathin'." "Got it, let's give it a try," Sharon proclaimed, her voice shaky as the pressure she felt reached its pinnacle. Tim could read her expression well. His role as a witch's Paladin included emotional support whenever a moment of uncertainty or hardship appeared. Instead of interrupting her or being pushy, he opened his arms to gesture an invitation for closeness. Sharon bit her lip and glanced at him sheepishly. "Why not..." she answered in a barely audible voice and melted into his arms, releasing a contented sigh. Tim couldn't believe how good it felt to hold his flame so close, only reluctantly forcing his arms open to release her. Reassured by these tender actions, Sharon felt much more unburdened and allowed her thoughts to drift away as she visualised the beam of light.

"Skinan brathin!" she chanted, and a bright beam of light extended from her wand. Her eyes widened in utter disbelief. Feeling even more confident after this positive outcome, Sharon visualised the beam becoming brighter and dimmer, longer and shorter. Both Tim and Miko's mouths formed wide smiles as their palms met in a high five. Tim then walked over to the old oak and gently patted its thick, wrinkled bark. Audun unleashed a deep, rich laugh. "I'm a bloody witch, I can do extraordinary things!"

Sharon Waterfield shouted, in her uncontained celebration. Her and Tim's eyes locked onto each other once again, both sparkling with a delight that expressed more than a thousand words could. Meanwhile, Miko reopened the book, displaying the page that depicted the time portal incantation. Self-assured and brimming with confidence, Sharon drew a large circle onto the dusty dirt road, seven times clockwise, carefully following the instructions. Whoever designed this book did so brilliantly, as the illustrations were clear and easy to follow. Further upwards within the circle, she wrote the rune associated with higher forces, intuition, or the flow of energies, and one for primal force, stacking them upon each other.

Evoked by this, the circle began to shimmer. Right beneath, connected in a radial style, were the runes for land, season, and flow once again. As a final step, Sharon placed her bracelet in the centre. Bursting with expectation, the trio observed closely, hoping for the outcome of the ritual they had placed so much faith in. The glowing old symbols, carefully drawn into the dusty ground, sank into the earth. A painfully long moment of nothingness followed, an absence of any effect. Miko sat down, discouraged, while Tim forced a half-hearted, compassionate smile and placed his hand on Sharon's shoulder, who was silently grieving. All of a sudden, a man-high black hole appeared where the runes had been. Framed by a strong wind, the sheer variety of energy involved was impossible to comprehend. Inside the black hole, a familiar scene unfolded, a mirage depicting the outdoor cooking spot Tim and his friends had used nearly two weeks ago. With a snug smirk on his face, Tim Meyer saluted Audun and bade farewell. "See you later in more appropriate circumstances." "Goodbye," Sharon uttered. "Thank you so much, it's been a pleasure working with you," Miko warmly concluded.

In high hopes, the three entered the phenomenal magical portal. No tunnel of light, no dark chasm had to be crossed, it was as easy as stepping over a doorstep. The strong wind that had accompanied the black hole vanished, and as they turned around, the portal was gone, and they were back in 2015.

“Hell of a trip that was,” Tim interrupted the moment of shared astonishment. “Hell of a trip?!” Miko reiterated in a distressed tone. “That was a behemoth chain reaction of mishaps.” Slowly, her tone calmed, just like the wind before. “But we made it. Thanks, folks, you’re great companions.” Sharon rejoiced in a tone of euphorically high-heartedness that was in no way characteristic for her. “Well, guys, since I’ve lost my entire order, would you mind having me on the team?” Miko asked. “I own a lot of knowledge in theory and practice. In other words, I’m good having around.” “You’re already part of it,” Sharon announced festively. “Couldn’t agree more. We need every help we can get,” Tim corroborated, with palpable relief playing on his face.

Chapter eleven – In close Proximity

Tim and his friends' premature arrival completely disrupted Lopt Slygod’s and Richard Midländer’s schedules. However, the arrival of an experienced newcomer, Miko, brought a glimmer of optimism to Task Force Fir. It’s also worth noting that Sharon’s promising first attempts at witchcraft fuelled her growing desire to become an expert in the field. She absorbed the mysteriously delivered spellbook's content like a dry sponge soaking up a few exposed drops of water. Lopt, who had been a highly convincing actor in his role as Tim's stand-in, was now, since the real Tim had returned, free to take on other duties. That said, it hadn’t been much of a challenge for him to begin with. A diligent individual, both a fellow wizard and an e-commerce specialist, had taken responsibility for Tim’s and Bedirhan’s online business. In return, he secured a generous share of the profits. Tim’s friends seemed occupied with their own daily tasks, and only Franziska and Bedirhan spent a brief amount of time with him. Nothing too demanding for a capable shapeshifter like Lopt.

Another factor that put TFF’s cohesion to the test was the explosion at Martin Fink’s apartment. The good news and a mood-lifting revelation, was that Martin had miraculously survived with only minor

injuries, practically unscathed. After being frozen into a block of ice, his skin turned slick. In this condition, he couldn't move, and his body, pressed against the leather chair's likely smooth surface, slid to the ground beneath his desk. When the explosion hit, the sturdy furniture absorbed most of the blast. Ironically, the freezing spell cast by his vile pursuer ended up saving him. However, due to the force of the impact and the following days in a coma, he forgot the identity of his assailant. A significant amount of assets was destroyed as well. Still, Martin's deceitful opponent didn't seem all that clever. She failed to take advantage of the opportunity to gather the freely available information scattered throughout his room. This stroke of luck meant that the task force's headquarters remained hidden.

#

It wouldn't be wrong to accuse life of having a strange, ironic sense of humour, given that, paradoxically, the Lancers' headquarters was almost within sight. If one were to construct a watchtower next to the task force's base and point a telescope northeast, they would spot a narrow crease in the valley's layout. There, a large forgotten structure from the early nineteen hundreds would swiftly fall into one's view. It had been constructed as a sanctuary for people suffering from tuberculosis slightly more than a hundred years ago, by order of a local duchess. The architecture resembled other institutional buildings of the era. Man-high, sturdy blocks of skilfully processed sandstone formed its foundation. On top of this, a combination of brick walls, clad and enriched with wooden elements, effortlessly reminded the eye of the constructors' competence. One of its most impressive features was the steeply angled rooftops, almost mimicking those of a sinister old Gothic cathedral. To sum it all up, the entire estate looked like a large, late Victorian mansion with multiple floors, a prominent pointy Gothic roof, and was sprinkled with typical German architectural elements.

Unfortunately, during the early nineties, its remote location no longer matched modern infrastructural expectations, leading to its abandonment. To reach it, one had to follow a slim road meandering through the forest. The hospital was situated halfway up the low ridge mountain, and behind

it, the forest's dark canopy remained untouched by civilisation. Yet, it did not stand completely alone. Some small, peculiar houses were crammed along a thin one-way road. Nobody really knew who lived there, and if they were seen, you'd be greeted with a suspicious glance. If one was to translate the area's ambience into a tune, it would sound melancholic, paired with the reverent silence of nature and a faint hint of something darker hiding amidst the chords. It goes without question that such a composition attracts many self-proclaimed ghost hunters. This, of course, wasn't remotely compatible with the New Order Lancers' code of secrecy, which is why they placed a large metal wall supported by warning signs around the location. Somewhat reminiscent of the wall that once divided East and West Germany, it only added to the overall resemblance of a spooky, archaic castle.

To categorise the LNO as no more than yet another dark order that misuses witchcraft to thrive by establishing mafia-like structures would be a dangerous misjudgement. Within a framework that utilises a reprehensible recruitment method and years of ideological manipulation, they form individuals who are expected to rise to the rank of Master. If a few of these happen to not achieve the third rank, they'll indefinitely end up as poor, disfavoured outcasts, threatened with death if they ever dare to reach out to other orders. It goes without saying that their 'wizard ethics' are a corrupted version of what's usually taught to students. The Order is more than the individual, the task of world domination stands above the Order, above all Munrir as a coming god at the top. Just like any other order of magic, the LNO had a vast array of traditions. One of these was attending ceremonies dressed in white robes with hoods, decorated with golden ornaments. Another tradition was the use of code names, each representing a poisonous herb.

Codename Deadly Nightshade had just arrived at the headquarters after parking her car in one of the old garages next to a small, uninhabited family home. She was dressed in an ordinary hoodie and jeans, with a black travel bag slung over her right shoulder. Familiar with the password and the path, Nightshade approached the foreboding wall and pressed the intercom button. "How's the weather going to be this week?" asked a voice, hoarse and robotic through the device. The witch replied, "Bright, soothing sunlight with no clouds in sight." A long beeping sound signalled that the door had unlocked.

Nightshade entered the hospital through a broken door. The building appeared sturdy yet rundown, with nothing hinting at the vibrant activities beneath. There used to be a lift connecting all the floors, but one of the paranoid LNO executives, who had an irrational fear of elevators, had it replaced with a regular stairwell. The hospital originally had stairs, as it was built before lifts became common, but they didn't reach the LNO's operational floor. She quickly took the stairs and reached the intricate bunker system. Another member of the Order, called Monkhood, welcomed her, tapping Nightshade firmly on the shoulder. Her tone and gaze hinted at a quiet sadness which seemed suppressed by an overarching ideological worldview, a product of prolonged mental manipulation.

"What you've done, sister, has lifted a lot of weight from our shoulders. We're so proud of you." Monkhood gestured energetically with her hands. "Imagine if every one of us were as clever as you. World domination would already be achieved." Sister Deadly Nightshade's eyes brimmed with unshed tears, she loved the commendation. "Hey, we give everything we can, don't we? Imagine our lives once our order is in charge, all those opportunities! With our understanding of magic, we could revolutionise the entire society. With all the taxpayer money at our disposal, we could also abolish the necessary evil of relying on protection money." What she referred to here was a practice the LNO used to extort money from non-magical people. Usually, one of their talking ravens was sent to rather wealthy individuals with threats ranging from harassment to property destruction if they didn't pay the Order a certain amount. Given that the entire process was carried out by talking animals and the fee paid into a sham bank, any attempt to inform the police would have been fruitless. It would have been dismissed as utter lunacy, thus the victims remained helpless.

Nevertheless, there was another meeting of utmost importance on her and Nightshade's agenda. "But let's talk with Brother Angel's Trumpet and Raintree." Her curiosity was piqued once more, and she raised an eyebrow at Monkhood. "Aren't those the two who failed to capture Sharon Waterfield?" Sister Monkhood took her by the hand, leading her through the briskly moving headquarters. The amount of professional equipment, ranging from communication devices, high-end computers, radars, and countless

monitors, mirrored that of the TFF's headquarters. Bands of wizards and witches crossed their path, all either engaged in a task or indulging in animated chatter with their fellow members. "Yes, you're right, but to their defence, who would have expected such a skilfully performed rescue mission from the TFF? Their quick and self-sufficient decision was anything but negligible." They finally reached the main square at the headquarters' centre. From this point, dozens of hallways led to other rooms, halls, and underground warehouses. Attached to every entrance was the New Lancers emblem. It depicted a wand and a pickaxe forming a cross, underlined by a broom, all within a white circle on a pitch-black backdrop.

This emblem was chosen to commemorate the Order's encounter with Munrir during their search for rare minerals. Instead of the expected trade goods that were supposed to bring them wealth, they found their 'misunderstood saviour'. Right in front of them, fixed to the wall, a gigantic 480-inch monitor loomed with its tremendous, pressing presence. It displayed an interactive map of the world, with borders matching the LNO's high command's future plans. Each region that had been taken over or lost changed its colour on the map. From the right, two men in their late twenties, tall with palpable Bavarian accents, approached Monkhood and Deadly Nightshade. Their attire was casual but sturdy, and each of them wore a tactical vest. Monkhood greeted the two with a Roman forearm handshake. In her energetic, resonant voice, she introduced Sister Deadly Nightshade to them.

"Let me get you all introduced, Raintree and Angel's Trumpet." Both extended their hands for another firm and polite handshake, which she gladly accepted. "And this courageous young witch is Sister Deadly Nightshade." Raintree gestured towards some large, cushioned red conference chairs, inviting them to take a seat. Once everyone was seated, Nightshade turned her attention to Angel's Trumpet, eager to learn more about their main adversary. Her nervousness and excitement made her voice slightly breathy, given the possibility that she might cross paths with Sharon. "So, as we know, you've nearly managed to capture her already. What is this woman like? What can we expect from her?"

Angel's Trumpet leaned forward, resting his chin on his hands, which were supported by the chair's armrests. The cushions gave way slightly under his elbows as he took a few seconds to recall all the details from his memory, each word spoken in his thick Bavarian accent. "Sharon Waterfield, once placed amidst a group of women her age, doesn't really stand out at first glance with her clothing. We quickly noticed her slightly oversized T-shirt, a friendship bracelet, and, worth mentioning, vibrant-coloured scrunches. She carried a small bag with her, which didn't hold much equipment aside from a water flask adorned with weird stickers, a mobile phone, purse, keys, and some makeup. The overall picture was that of a young tourist who had chosen comfortable attire, no wands, no potions, no spell books, nothing."

Deadly Nightshade strained her ears. Her enemy sounded far less formidable than she had imagined. "Bracelets, stickers, scrunchies... It all sounds a bit immature for a woman of her age and calling. But if we ignore her style for a moment, what does she look like? What's her personality?" This time, Raintree answered her question. "What is certain is that she studied a year of computer science, which shows she can learn and process information. Sharon is definitely not dumb. If our source is correct, her grade would lead to merit. Waterfield struck us as level-headed and calm, not someone who'd be easily frightened or overly confident." Nightshade's fingers restlessly tapped on the armrest. Her reaction seemed contemplative, almost as if she were still calculating while she spoke.
"A conventionally smart girl with a somewhat balanced personality." "Which means that each day that passes holds the possibility of her becoming more knowledgeable and more dangerous to us," Monkhood interjected before concluding, "The earlier we take her out, the easier it will be for us."

The other three looked at each other, frowned, and nodded conspiratorially. Nightshade tilted her head, her eyebrow raised. "But how does she look? We should be able to recognise her," she pressed inquisitively. Raintree's attention was fixed on a potted palm tree in the opposite room as he answered. "Sharon Waterfield's height is somewhere between five foot five and five foot six. She looks sporty, perhaps she does or did some cardio. Her face is an amalgam of prominent and soft features, she has a

rather high forehead and some freckles. Her eye colour is hazel, and her hair is as brown as a chestnut. Overall, she's attractive, I can imagine she might have some leverage with that on this Tim Meyer guy." Monkhood's demeanour grew more and more annoyed, since she was a self-absorbed person. She longed to be the most apt and best-looking amongst the local witches, therefore any form of admiration directed at her peers irritated her. "It doesn't matter if she's attractive or not." The order's member tried her best to lessen the tension. Brother Angel's Trumpet stepped in with another important revelation. "Indeed, it doesn't matter, but what does matter is that she and her companion Tim Meyer have disappeared. Unrelated to this, another mishap occurred in Japan." "Our comrades there, with the assistance of their serpent, managed to destroy the Shiroi Mahō base in Ise, but didn't complete the job."

"One member of the Weaving Foxes escaped, most probably alongside the main objective, which is a very potent wand created by their most renowned scholar, Akihiro." Monkhood's face turned as pale as the morning dew after her sense of hearing processed this mortifying message. Her response was breathy, as if the state of shock had barely passed. "That's not just a mishap! It's a tragedy with wide-ranging consequences. Capturing this particular wand was the main objective, do you have any idea how much harder this makes our entire goal to achieve?! If we fail to manipulate the Pillar of Light and dim the sun, there will be no rebirth of society and this exact unit will be to blame."
The mere possibility of defeat pierced through the four magicians' hearts like a spear.

A persuasive robotic beeping roared through the base's speakers, interrupting their budding worries. The words brushing through it sounded distant but clear. "Attention, this is an announcement, no emergency or test. I repeat, no emergency or test. All Order members within the base, aside from staff charged with outside surveillance duty, are expected at Warehouse 7. I repeat, all who are not occupied with outside surveillance duty are called to assemble at Hall 7." Silence, and magicians curiously looking around, followed at the announcement's end. Swiftly, the whole room exploded in animated chatter. The noise of a hundred shoes tapping on the stone floor echoed through the hallways. Deadly Nightshade,

Monkhood, Raintree, and Angel's Trumpet followed as well. A strong Swabian accent, owned by some wizard walking in front of them, remarked, "I don't have a good feeling about this." Another member, with the timbre of a Dutch accent, countered, "Speak for yourself, there's no reason for hysteria."
It took a good amount of time to cram the entire regiment into Warehouse 7, but the image unfurling in front was worth all the organisational effort. About the size of a small house, enticing with its lean futuristic design, a UFO stood majestically at Hall Seven's centre. Karl Surt, the man in charge of the entire base, bald with a pair of fiercely staring blue eyes, meandered through the mass until he reached its centre. There was no doubt that this extra-terrestrial flying object was part of an intricate plan.

Despite the wide diversity of traditions and rituals that made the countless orders unique, some aspects remained a unifying factor. One example of this was the rank structure, which in this case was similar throughout multiple countries within central, northern, and north-western European orders. The Lancers of the new Order were no exception to this rule. Karl Surt held the title of High Staffwielder, equalling the responsibilities of a major general in non-magical structures. Below it, one would find Staffwielders, followed by the lowest ranks, called Galdrists. High Staffwielder Surt gathered the entire base to introduce the plan he had meticulously forged. In his hand rested a finely crafted black alder wand; a ruby stone crowned its tip, and the grip was adorned with golden ornaments. This fine piece of prestigious craftsmanship was more than enough to indicate its wielder's position in the upper echelons of wizard society. He used it to cast a charm to amplify his voice, which ironically sounded righteous, mellow, and passionate, unfitting for a dark order's commander, though fitting their own perception of themselves.

"Ufhebjana meina Stimmon!" "Now you can hear me loud and clear. Dear brothers and sisters, you may find yourselves surprised to see what the outside world calls a UFO. Furthermore, you may wonder how we managed to produce such a vehicle and construct its engine. Well, aside from using some

machinery and expertise required for the hull and interior, the simplicity of the answer that follows might baffle you once more." Karl pulled a lever, which opened a door on the UFO's side, presenting its crude but practical and sturdy cockpit. "There have been times when we magicians sliced through the sky with simple enchanted brooms. Non-magical folk were both unable and oblivious to the means of flight. Unfortunately, the invention of aircraft, airspace surveillance, a densely crowded environment, and the ignorance of the unknowing robbed us of this luxury. This is about to change very soon, my fellowship. Integrated into this airship are the very same brooms which once were in use, nine of them, to be precise. Nine enchanted brooms are sufficient to allow effortless elevation into the endless blue horizon."

"The cockpit was intentionally kept simple, containing only navigation and communication devices, advanced optics, and comfortable seats. But..." Suddenly, he raised his index finger and adopted the tone of a know-it-all. "The two most important features are: an internal tank that contains gallons of invisibility potion, allowing the airship to smoothly appear and disappear. Since there's no engine that would radiate warmth, it's unable to be spotted by heat-seeking devices, and thus deserves to be labelled 'invisible'. Feature number two is the existence of lockable loopholes, providing shooting angles to cast spells below it, to the left, right, rear, and front." Confidently, Karl returned his attention to the crowd, asking them, "Now, I'd like to test your creativity: what do you think is the plan behind that? Why, out of all other options, should we consider an air force campaign to overwhelm the others?"

Sister Monkhood raised her hand eagerly, her mind already confident of what Surt was planning all along. Bubbling with anticipation, she used the charm to raise her voice. "Even if the sunlight is dim and Munrir is able to resurface, the vast majority won't accept him as a saviour, rather as a menacing giant. Society's understanding of reality must be shattered to pieces. I expect those flying objects, with the combination of multiple spells being cast from loopholes, to be a method to cause havoc. They will be left with no other option but to perceive us as an advanced humanoid civilisation." Deadly Nightshade

nudged her in the side, whispering through her sly, smiling mouth. “Brilliantly combined, sis.” Monkhood answered her with an appreciative nod. Once again, Karl Surt claimed the attention. “This is exactly what I had in mind with these ingenious weapons. Yes, that’s what they are, our tools to reclaim the skies. I’ve just received a report that three launching stations positioned here in our yard are almost serviceable. Don’t worry about training on these flying objects, as we’ve made it unbelievably easy. The UFO is steered by a wand made from the same wood as the broomsticks. Combined with an elaborate enchantment, one can operate it like a videogame with joysticks. Here and now, I solemnly declare that the sky will be ours again. As the cities burn, a new power will emerge, our power, our order!”
As soon as this proclamation was uttered, the indoctrinated crowd burst into cheers.

Chapter twelve – a deceitful Silence

The moment Tim opened his eyes, a new surrounding welcomed him with its arguable unfamiliarity. Sublime walls and columns, brimming with Gothic style, left him in a state of awe. Despite its ominous ambience, lit only partly by a strongly contrasting warm light, there was no feeling of unease radiating from it. The structure possessed something reminiscent of a foggy dreamscape. Adding another ingredient to the setting’s ambiguous mixture was the rustic dark aesthetic of the late medieval period, when settlements consisted of sturdy woods built so closely adjacent to one another that a single fire could cause havoc. “What the heck, how did I end up here?” A remote movie set's lighting illuminated his new surroundings. Some barely audible commands, sounding like “Action, cut, we have to reshoot this scene,” startled him. Out of thin air, Vanadis manifested next to him, sitting in a director’s chair. At the sight of the imposing woman’s familiar face, his tension eased. “Oh, that’s a relief, just another dream. Vanadis, where are we?”

Momentarily distracted by the movie clapperboard in her hands, Vanadis’s answer was delayed. Her voice was tinged with confidence. “Good night, Tim Meyer. This is, or more precisely was, the movie

set for the Hollis Gondler series. A reverent ancient Gothic cathedral with so much movie equipment scattered all over the place is somewhat of a juxtaposition, don't you think?" Tim cocked his eyes, since he wasn't accustomed to this particular term. She answered before he could even start to ask.
"A juxtaposition is a situation or location where two opposites blend into each other." His facial expression relaxed once again. "Ah, I get it, like being alone in a place crowded with people, or throwing a party at a very dull location." Vanadis acknowledged his answer with a nod. "Or in your case, a lover burning with admiration for his flame hiding behind the face of someone not remotely interested in romance." Tim took a seat on a dark archaic oak bench. "At first I felt really uncomfortable with our mission, but now…"

Vanadis's aptitude in reading people's facial expressions and thoughts allowed her to finish his declaration. "...But now it feels like an adventure you've been meant to experience. You even perpetuated your foresight about it on paper, back when you were a kid." Tim shrugged back as remote memories of his childhood's recurring dreams surfaced. She leaned forward and asked Tim inquisitively,
"Let's address a different shadow of your past. If you try to evoke some memory, what do you connect to this place?" Tim took his time, trying to recall. His mind indeed connected to many objects and corners of the hall. Miriam and Franziska used to be very fond of these movies, as was Martin. He consumed the books like an uninhibited addict. On closer inspection, there was this undeniable air of whimsy, juvenile escapism, and bittersweet nostalgia for an era long gone. Vanadis left the chair herself, resting a hand on his shoulder. "You are a deep young man, what an array of thoughtful expressions, yet that's not what I wanted you to focus on. There is one person whom you especially associate with this universe."

The pensive timbre of Tim's "Mmmh" occupied a moment of silence. "Sharon! She's just a real-life version of Irmgard of some sorts." Vanadis chuckled loudly. "Ha-ha, good observation, but I'm talking about a friend long before Miss Waterfield entered the stage." The answer came with the speed of light. "Martin, Martin in the first year of middle school, he mentioned this cinematic universe a lot. But then he stopped, probably, he grew out of it." Tim's intonation lowered at the sentence's end, hinting at a

contemplation about his reasoning. Moving away from him, Vanadis occupied the director's chair again. "It's fascinating to observe how some visual, audible, or written inputs can shape us into the people we are today. Usually, I'm not one to talk behind people's backs, but since this fact may have great influence on yours and Sharon's mission, I'm obliged to share it. Martin Fink, one of the oldest members of your friend group, is a magician himself." Tim's green eyes widened, flickering with surprise and shock. "Well, in that case, he managed to hide it brilliantly thus far," he stuttered. Vanadis added, "If you take a small town of Kühltal's size, inhabited by, let's say, four thousand citizens, you'd be correct to expect around twenty of them to be magicians. You may find yourself baffled by one or two unexpected encounters. Tomorrow will lift a lot of mysteries."

The snapping of her fingers shoved Tim back into his bedroom, a new day had risen. He stretched his limbs languidly, followed by a mighty yawn. This room's structure hadn't changed for quite a while. In its centre, a weeping fig planted in a large, heavy turquoise pot placed on a skateboard still lingered. A potted tree riding on a skateboard could easily be mistaken for some surrealistic art project, yet the dry reality behind this choice was to make the plant easily movable. On his right side, the versatile, minimalist, but undoubtedly classic office desk stood there ever so reliably, tidy and organised. Perched on it were his PC and peripherals. In contrast to the desk's wood, an array of wardrobes, in a brighter brown, leaned against the room's walls unremarkably but still remained an integral part. However, there was a change, one that was easy to notice. Tim possessed a large double bed which he tended to call his 'sleeping corner', given its tremendous size. Even when placed directly against the wall, it occupied nearly an entire corner of his bedroom. Usually, he slept in the middle, with no need for a second pillow or blanket, but this time he had symbolically flung another set of bed gear next to his side. Tim did so in hope that it might soon be graced by Sharon's presence.

Tim Meyer was thoroughly captivated from the first sight of Sharon Waterfield onwards. Such deep admiration startled his usual pattern of forging intricate plans to win her heart. Most often, when he started to grow interested in another person, his hesitation, which he disguised as a plan to 'win her',

lasted until the admiration started to fade naturally. Although this time would be different, he wanted to succeed. The only uncertainty separating him from Sharon lingered in the shape of an age-old question, which was whether she would or wouldn't reject him. Rejection alongside failure was one of his most haunting fears, as it allowed the possibility for embarrassment to seep in and tarnish his sensible mood. Tim decided to revert his attention and shifted his gaze leftwards, where a picture he had painted hung. Though even the unrelated artistic depiction of a container ship reminded him of her, or more precisely, of the hole burned into it. During their training of the "Daga flustran" charm, meant to inflame objects, Sharon had got stuck on his desk's corner and slightly stumbled. Instead of a tiny sheet of paper he usually used to take some notes, she had set a part of his painting aflame.

A vivid knocking interrupted Tim from throwing mournful glances at his ruined painting. "Come in," he answered, already aware who it might be. Sharon stepped in, already dressed up with her wavy hair bent back into a ponytail. "Hey Timmy, check this out." She pointed her wand at a bottle of sparkling water. With the help of the levitation spell "Ris ja hit min staban nithra gadalwa," performed in a circular movement, she removed the screw cap. Repeating the spell, she levitated a mouthful of sparkling water. She asked him, "Open your mouth!" and lowered the refreshing liquid in.

Now far better hydrated, Tim answered with an appreciative gasp. "Well done, you're becoming more precise with your spellwork, I reckon." "Sorry for waking you up, but your night must have been much better than mine regardless. This levitation spell I learned yesterday was easy to comprehend, but I still couldn't manage to cast a lightning bolt. It kept me on my feet. That's why I woke up early."

Tim finally rose from his bed and tidied up the blankets and pillows. "Good morning, my witch. It's all good. I'm glad you're so eager to learn. I bet you've figured out how to shoot a lightning bolt from your Japanese maple wand?" Sharon Waterfield's witty answer was quick to follow.

"Oh, of course I did, though I expect your neighbours are not too amused about their burnt-down roof."

The young German momentarily froze in shock, his eyes wide open as if about to pop out.

“No, that didn’t happen. I was pranking you badly.” The relief Meyer felt was strong enough to make one lose consciousness. “Bloody pranks, I almost believed you, given your other mishap,” he said, still breathy, as he judgmentally pointed at his abused artwork. “You’d better make up for it.”
“Already done, I made us some nice breakfast: baked beans, tomatoes, tattie scones, eggs and bacon, of course.” Her well-meant efforts conjured a bright beam on his lips. “Never would I have thought I’d be one of those people starting the day with a rich breakfast. Now I’m utterly attached to it.”
All of a sudden, the image of Vanadis with her clapperboard crossed his train of thought once more.

“Before I forget, I received some new insights from Vanadis during my last slumber. It was something regarding my friend Martin. Apparently, he is a magician. I assume we should cooperate with him on some level, otherwise Vanadis would not have told me about it so explicitly. Usually, she does not contact you without a reason.” The young witch’s attention piqued once more, and she frowned conspiratorially. The tense atmosphere, stirred by countless theories about what role Martin Fink might play in the greater scheme of things, fortunately did not disturb the elaborate breakfast. Thoughts and contemplations were reduced to a subtle remnant, especially for Tim Meyer, who almost lost himself in Sharon’s unexpected culinary refinement. His phone, positioned on the edge of the kitchen table, vibrated insistently. He picked it up, and it was none other than the subject of their curiosity. “Oh hey, Martin, what’s up?” Sharon Waterfield dropped her fork, nearly choking on her tomato. She hung on every word that was intelligible to her steadily growing German skills. “Okay, let’s hang out at the local pool around three o’clock. See you, bye.” Tim returned his phone to the table's edge. “Sometimes, Sharon...” he remarked, in a newly gained tone of fatalistic understanding, “it feels like the Universe conspires for certain outcomes.” “I hear you, Timmy,” Sharon interjected. “Whatever Martin has to tell us, I can just sense its significance.”

The weather was oppressively hot on this Friday, the 24th of July, a perfect occasion to visit Kühltal's local pool. Situated at Kühltal's south-eastern end, it stood as a place boasting a surprisingly artistic style compared to its surroundings. With its vibrant colours, graffiti, and tropical elements, it looked as though silently rebelling against the small town's rather traditional layout. From an architectural point of view, this public pool was a living remnant of the eighties. Its tiles were kept in light blue, bordered by a line of trimmed bushes and many sun loungers. The small yet lengthy entrance building allowed customers to change clothes and purchase a little snack or drink. Behind it, the low ridge mountain's foundation accommodated some parking lots along a narrow road and the dense green forest's outskirts. There were groupings of sand around a beach volleyball net.

The quaint river that crossed the valley separated this humble pool from the other houses and the main road. Only a tiny bridge, adorned with juvenile bushes and trees in their lush green, allowed for crossing. Sharon Waterfield and Tim Meyer weren't seeking leisure in their mission, but rather an enlightening conversation with Martin Fink. Dressed in summer-like attire, their eyes quickly spotted Martin at the area's border, sitting on a towel with his shatter shades covering his eyes. He sat there like a statue, with a resigned demeanour that might make one assume he was a detective inspector who had seen too much to remain unburdened. Tim approached him, with Sharon following closely. "Hey bro, I hope you're doing better after that explosion accident. How could that even have happened?" He reached out his hand while Sharon waved appreciatively. "Hi Tim, glad to see you! Well, I'm not sure about that, but I owe you an explanation and an apology." "We already know, Vanadis has informed Timmy within a dream," Sharon interjected, her Scottish accent becoming more prevalent whenever she was excited.

Martin's eyebrows rose slightly, as he hadn't expected him to be that well connected with the spirits. "Vanadis? Usually, she doesn't contact someone unless you reach out to her. Seems as though Tim is indeed an integral part of this prophecy, more than an ordinary witch's paladin. Nevertheless, to make it short, I'm part of the TFF as well, working closely with our High Staffwielder, Theo, who is operating

from our base, a location even you two don't know. To ensure you could stay on your mission without interruptions, we've been monitoring your surroundings. Lopt's raven Sky Eye robbed our bird's talking device back at the River Lights Festival. Sharon still nearly got captured, and an LNO member almost followed you home. I think we can all agree that our surveillance operation pretty much backfired. Though one thing is for sure, there is a snitch among our friends. We don't know who. I should have been open about it, but I was worried the snitch might hear. In hindsight, our secrecy didn't work to our advantage. All I can say is that I'll make up for it, bro." There was a profound honesty in Martin's tone, and Tim and Sharon accepted the apology. "I know it's a sentence that's used way too often, but you did it with good intentions." Tim's memory suddenly painted vivid pictures of what he had seen in his dream, and a question bothered him sparked.

Conscious of the ever-present threat of an eavesdropper on their tracts, he made sure to lower his voice before uttering his question. "It's about the Hollis Gondler universe. I recall you being such a vivid fan of it, until one day you dropped the topic entirely. What happened back then?" Martin Fink threw an observant glance to the left, right, and behind him. "We were strongly advised not to talk about it. Take a seat, you two, it's a long but thrilling story and part of our own task force's founding." Tim and Sharon's curiosity peaked at that very moment, so they sat down next to him. "Ironically, what millions of people believe to be mere escapism into some made-up fantasy world actually happened. We call it the 'Fjölnir Wars'. It occurred during the eighties and nineties and was a bloody mess." Martin's facial expression mirrored a deep introspection, to a depth that could lead one to the misassumption that he had witnessed it with his own eyes. "You have to understand that, unlike the rest of the magical societies, where each order controls a certain region, all Scandinavian countries are governed by a single institution."
"Please go on, now I'm curious," Sharon pressed.

"Originally, they called themselves 'The Seidrist Thing'. Their formation was a consequence of the Kalmar Union's founding back on the 17th of July 1397. Those kingdoms retained a lot of autonomy despite the Union's overlordship, although Queen Margarete of Denmark at least found eagerness

amongst the magical orders to thoroughly unify. The Union itself ceased to exist in 1523, but the magicians willingly remained united. This prompted local nobles to perceive the order as an untrustworthy institution, so they did everything they could to limit its influence. Eventually, those nobles had to set an example and did so by ambushing and killing four mages who had used witchcraft to wall up a storehouse. In hindsight, symbolically, the four consisted of a Swede, a Norwegian, a Dane, and a Finn. The order commemorated them by renaming themselves 'The Four Magi'. Despite the attack, the fortitude of the order remained firm; they never dissolved." Tim gazed at the distant, clear turquoise tiles of the pool. "Captivating history, but how does it relate to Hollis Gondler?"

"Be patient, we'll get to that," Martin assured. "It all led to Scandinavia being very centralised in magical affairs."

"They established some sort of magical academy that all of their offspring attend, which can be reached by entering certain portals, just like Neon Beach. The LNO realised that if they could subdue this order, they would gain the entirety of Scandinavia in one act. So they gathered a jarringly capable task force, composed of many of their best members, to slowly infiltrate and overpower the Four Magi. A young half-Swede called Fjölnir Gondler, backed by the whole academy, was chosen to terminate their evil plan. He was born with magical abilities, despite none of his ancestors having any. Their Order's High Staffwielder was contacted and informed by Vanadis, much like you were. To cut a long story short, after twenty years of back and forth, the Lancers task force was obliterated and the countries were saved, although many of their assets were destroyed in the process. Fortunately for them, this entire incident was epic enough to be archived in a series of books and films. Naturally, all names of people, locations and some dates had to be changed before going to market. Regardless, it became a huge success, with even some fellow magicians portraying the main characters. A bitter lesson from that war was how effective a task force solely dedicated to a specific mission can be. That is how Task Force Fir was established, funded in part by the income generated through commercialising their story."

A warm smile crossed Sharon's face as she spotted the same father playing football with his little son, whom she had noticed last Sunday. However, it did not mean she was paying any less attention to Martin. "So the Four Magi founded the TFF," she concluded. "Yes, of course, with the White Magic's Defensive Alliance's permission." Tim tapped Martin on the shoulder. "Thanks for telling us the whole story. Now it all makes a lot more sense. Let me get us some beers to toast to our new path of cooperation." He hurried towards the entrance building. Sharon Waterfield turned her gaze towards Martin. "Any ideas about the next step?" Martin rested his chin on his fist, thinking deeply. "It should be about time to find out where the mystical Pillar of Light is situated. I have a vague idea of how to solve this, but give me some time to discuss it with Theo." Tim returned with three ice-cold beers, passing one to each of his companions. "To us, the TFF, the Four Magi and the White Magic Defence Alliance." The toast was whispered by Tim for the sake of maintaining secrecy.

Coincidentally, just as they were entering the public pool, Franziska, Bedirhan, and Ekaterina spotted Tim, Sharon, and Martin. The trio decided to come over. "Hey bro, long time no see," Bedirhan Alemdar greeted Tim Meyer energetically, then turned to the others. "What's up, Martin, standing tall like a champ." He gave Sharon Waterfield a surprised look. "You must be Sharon, the girl who moved over to us from Scotland?" "Yes, that's me. I'm glad to have someone like Tim, who's such an anchor in this new place." The young Turk was pleasantly surprised and prematurely assumed a budding relationship between Tim and Sharon. His girlfriend Ekaterina noticed his reaction, while Franziska suddenly started coughing. "Everything okay, Franziska?" Tim asked, concerned. Her voice suddenly sounded raspy. "Oh, it's really nothing to worry about, perhaps I've caught a cold. I'd better go home."
The friends shrugged in mutual confusion since she had just arrived and then left.
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Later that day, back in their apartment, Tim persuaded Sharon to watch Domian with him, the classic German radio and TV talk show. For him it seemed the only proper way to conclude the insightful chapter this day had been. Plenty of callers opened up, telling their stories, some funny, others obscure or

frightening. However, they found themselves unprepared for the fateful message the next caller uttered. The host, in his chess-patterned shirt, looked as confused as they were. "Alvis, are you trying to tell me that you saw a real UFO floating above your spa park?" "Well, I would not call it my spa park since I am a tourist, not living in Forstquelle, but yes, it was clearly visible." Usually, only one person was allowed to be on the line at a time, but his team informed him that another person had witnessed the same event, so the host made an exception. A breathy voice of a heavy man rustled through the line. "My name is Jürgen, I am forty-two years old and I saw a UFO over Forstquelle as well." Tim and Sharon's eyes met in clear suspicion. "For sure this is going to spell trouble," he remarked, with palpable concern in his voice. "A spaceship, I have a weird feeling about this." Sharon sounded haunted. As her words trailed off, she directed a suspicious gaze out of the window. For now, the night sky remained clean of any threats, but to Tim's and Sharon's misfortune, this was about to change very soon.

Chapter thirteen – The Informant

A breeze of excitement rushed through the futuristic corridors of the LNO's headquarters as soon as the first reports from the test flights arrived. Sister Monkhood and Deadly Nightshade were amongst the festive assembly. One voice rose above the others in its persistent volume.

"We haven't performed a vision quest for quite a while. Perhaps the upcoming offensive gives reason to seek insight." Brother Raintree took note of this suggestion as well, his reply was laced with the easily recognisable Bavarian accent. "Why not let Sister Monkhood do it? She's never undertaken one yet, as far as I know." The young witch gazed at the ground with budding fear. A vision quest required exceptional meditation skill and wasn't entirely without risk. There had been incidents where the performer's consciousness never fully returned to their body, leaving them in a dreamlike haze. In some cases, the essence of an unfortunate mage had become entangled with that of another who performed the quest at the same time. One might begin to understand why the successful execution of such a demanding ritual qualified someone to be recognised as a Master wizard.

A young magician nudged her to the side, trying his best to restore Sister Monkhood's confidence. His manner of speaking revealed that he must have been raised in the Berlin region. "No feigned modesty, Sister. Keep in mind that every single one of us graduated with the Master Mage rank. But if you need some 'Afterburner' to put worries aside and fully immerse yourself in the ritual, maybe this portion of fly agaric juice will help you. It's very lightly dosed, don't worry." Monkhood accepted the little potion glass and cast an observant gaze at it. "Thanks, man, I'll give it a try. Now we only need the elevated chair." The elevated chair she spoke of was part of yet another tradition amongst the greater magical society. It was believed that a higher position allowed for a momentary separation in status. Just like a throne, it functioned as a way to raise someone above the rest, to emphasise that this particular individual had been chosen by the group to gather insight.

Superficially in build and decoration, this unique furniture varied from order to order, from region to region, yet its intention remained a unifying factor. It took the wizards a while to manoeuvre it through the crowd. The chair's left armrest was adorned with a moon face, carved into the wood with silver elements. On the right, a sun, embellished with golden details, was depicted. Sister Monkhood hesitantly took her place on it, one might say nervousness got the better of her. "We're all with you, sis. If any mishap ensues, you've got a base full of deft mages to restore it," Angels Trumpet reassured her, taking yet another bite of his large pretzel, enriched with a spread of butter. Monkhood's gaze was fixed on the tiny potion bottle in her left hand. Finally, after some internal back-and-forth, she took a sip. Her heart thrummed lightly for a few seconds, and a cold shiver ran down her spine. It was almost as if she momentarily gained the ability to feel each fibre of her body, until she seeped away.

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Mere seconds later, she fell into a deep slumber and awoke in a room that looked oddly akin to Domian's television studio, set amidst an undefinable foggy sphere. Three softly shining spotlights partially illuminated the room in a pink hue. In front of her was a desk, with an office chair behind it. Upon the table lay some pens, sheets of paper, and other office equipment. There was a person occupying

the chair, with long black hair, facing away from her. Monkhood was slightly taken aback as she witnessed the abrupt turning of the person's focus. Her voice dropped to a barely audible whisper as she saw who the elusive host appeared to be. "Vanadis, you've never reached out to me. But now I encounter you as Helena, associated with foreboding trouble." Helena's voice lacked the youthful slack Vanadis had. She sounded like an old witch, not evil in the slightest, but rather with a fatalistic undercurrent and raspy tone . "You've gotten yourself into a real predicament here, young lady, about to be an accomplice in committing a crime against the common Harmony. Dimming the sunlight just to make way for an evil giant to roam freely will lead to more suffering than your simple mind could ever comprehend, young lady. Life on this earth requires a certain balance, one of light and darkness. If one disturbs it, everyone will be endangered. Turn around before it's too late."

But Sister Monkhood was thoroughly indoctrinated by the order, unable to accept any differing view. She glanced at Helena with warm eyes as she dared to calm justified concern. "But we're not going to destroy the pillar of light, just tune it to make sunlight less hurting for Munrir." Helena shook her head in utter discontent, her gaze on Monkhood was judgmental. "The pillar of light predates every culture on this planet. It's so finely adjusted that life on Earth is possible. Do you really think one can just manipulate it to his will? Your order's arrogance and ignorance surpass everything I've ever experienced. Many of you aren't even fully matured, yet you linger in the shadows, seeking power at the first opportunity. You lie to the extent that even friendship means nothing in your way of thinking. But of course, the misunderstood saviour will lead humanity into a golden age. The only thing he will lead you into is a dark age, in the most literal sense." Helena's voice ravaged Monkhood's sense of hearing, and her eyes pierced into her very core. It felt imposing to such an extent that it triggered a defensive reaction. Monkhood sensed herself being pushed into a corner by an intimidating threat. This overwhelming pressure prompted her to draw her yew tree wand and point it at Helena. Her opponent, however, displayed superior and faster spellwork. With lightning speed, Helena drew a wand made of elderberry wood, magnificently decorated with ornaments of white gold. "Afbewana fainana." Helena magically

disarmed Monkhood, pulling the wand away with her own. The young witch stood in a state of profound shock. Eventually, she broke the silence. “Such a spell doesn’t even exist, at least, I didn’t know it.” Helena, still filled with furious disappointment, stood up and screamed at her imperatively. “There are a lot of things you don’t know. So take your ignorance and stop wasting my time. Unless you change, I despise seeing you ever again. Wake up.”

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A snap of her fingers relieved Monkhood from her vision quest. “Tell us, what have you seen? Any good or bad news?” Distant babbling of faded voices inquired from her. She took a deep breath, looking at her fellow order's magicians with dead eyes. “Nothing.” Overwhelmed, she stormed out of the room, heading for her own quarters. Her comrades exchanged confused and suspicious glances. Had Sister Monkhood really seen nothing?

Far from any moral doubts, Tim Meyer and Sharon Waterfield had just finished a workout session at the local gym. Sharon bragged about her superiority in endurance, claiming that he urgently needed to step up his game if he planned to catch up with her whenever their mission required it. Of course, Tim couldn’t just leave this accusation unchallenged and was left with no other option but to challenge her to a cardio competition, which the energetic witch won. Only after taking an elaborate shower at this ordinary institution of sport could he regain some vigour. “Your endurance is baffling. I guess cardio really is your thing?” Sharon chuckled triumphantly, yet without any trace of arrogance. “Well, my father Dand and my mother Ainsley met each other at a marathon, so perhaps it runs in the family?” “But one thing is for sure, Timmy.” She paused, locking eyes with him deeply, her voice warm with appreciation. “When it comes to strength, you’re a real bear. I honestly didn’t expect that.”
Tim blushed profoundly, his inevitably forming contented smile appearing undoubtedly adorable to Sharon. The moment of mutual appreciation, which betrayed more about their relationship than either would have admitted, didn’t last long, as a new message on the Broomracer 101 app made Tim’s phone beep.

"It's Martin, working like clockwork as usual." He sent her a pleased look, once more reassured about his friend's diligence. "Great. Any progress is good progress. What did he find out?" Sharon inquired. Tim cleared his throat, checked the surroundings for any unwanted attention, and began reading. "Hey comrades, just as promised, I did some research backing up my theory that there is still an untouched source of insight. I want to pinpoint at this ugly eighties apartment building, the only one in Kühltal , perched on the slope that marks the southern valley's end. There's an elusive but apparently kind-hearted gentleman living there, must be in his early forties. His name is Hugo Mispel, a former member of the LNO whose near-blindness rendered him unfit for service. As a matter of fact, he didn't leave their order on good terms. Fourth floor, apartment number thirteen. I know it sounds odd, but bring him some dried lavender. This man tends to smoke it or brew tea, we're not really sure. Hugo seems like a down to earth, approachable character and some gift should be enough to win his sympathy."

On this bright afternoon, Saturday the 25th, the sky was clear of clouds. The slowly lowering sun bathed Kühltal's surroundings in a richly saturated golden hue, making everything look almost as if it had been drawn in a comic. Tim's often disregarded yet undoubtedly existing artistic sense felt very drawn to this exact kind of ambient lighting, as it held a tinge of mellow cheerfulness. Accompanying the two were Martin and Miko, who were meeting each other for the first time. "Sometimes I feel like we've collectively stepped into an anime," Tim remarked as they made their way up the paved street that wound towards the often overlooked apartment building. "Why does it always have to be anime? There are other forms of media," Miko, the Japanese witch, replied. She had recently been formally integrated into the TFF, whose undercover operations required a more casual appearance. Next to her, Martin, who occasionally cast both bashful and interested glances at Miko, remained silent until they reached the estate. The multi-storey apartment house's height was unmatched compared to the small town's other structures, coloured in an unexciting beige that could badly do with a fresh coat of paint here and there. At its entrance, Martin, the most experienced of the group, quickly briefed his comrades. "You two go pay a visit to Mispel. Miko and I will keep any bandits off your back. Do you have the lavender, Sharon?"

She opened her bag and checked the recommended ingredients. “Yup, got it.” Tim and Sharon disappeared behind the building’s entrance.

“Apartment thirteen, here we go.” His heart was thrumming in that very moment. What if it was all an intricately prepared trap? Anything was possible in those critical seconds. Tim Meyer pressed the doorbell, and a man six feet tall with milky eyes opened up. A goatee grew on his chin, and Hugo’s dirty blonde hair was tied back into a ponytail. “How can I help you folks? Probably not much, since my sense of sight is obviously limited.” Hugo’s question was conveyed in a non-threatening voice, yet his hand lingered on a wand he had tucked in his back pocket. Sharon Waterfield took over. “Mister Mispel, my name is Sharon Waterfield and this is Tim Meyer. I think we can both find common ground, as we both want to preserve the sunlight. We brought you some lavender. We’ve heard you’re a fan of it, for some reason.” Hugo Mispel understood her cryptic message and responded with a kind nod.

“Ah, you two must be from the TFF, the Four Magi’s brainchild, I reckon, although I expected you to look a bit more fierce, no offence. Come in, I’ll offer you my assistance.” The first thing greeting the duo was the skull of a Texas longhorn mounted on the wall, beneath it a black leather couch. Worth mentioning was the picture of a hot rod standing on a desert road with a sign reading ‘Route 66’, next to it a spiky cactus tree. “A fan of Texas?” Tim Meyer asked, his voice laced with harmless curiosity.
A whimsful sigh escaped the blind man’s throat. “I’ve never come far from here since I left the Order. Once you’re stuck in one place for a very long time, everything even slightly foreign seems unbelievably intriguing.” Hugo moved into the kitchen for a few minutes and returned with a glass containing a blue-coloured liquid. “A fellow taskforce member of yours already contacted me. I knew you would come, otherwise, you’d still be standing outside. One can’t be too careful these days.” Tim nodded in agreement. “Well, that was Martin. We’ve experienced some critical moments ourselves, which is why we’ve begun to act only with people we can fully trust.”

Hugo Mispel took a mouthful of the unknown potion. “Now that we can be fully open with each other, let me tell you that I’ve never turned blind,” he revealed. “Consuming this highly concentrated potion of lavender and incense keeps up the illusion. A lesser-known trick used throughout time to guise oneself in innocuousness.” Sharon’s and Tim’s eyebrows knitted. “Lancers can’t really leave the Order unless they become unable to serve. They still pay me some sort of pension, the amount is generous, if you’re honourably discharged, that is. I should add that most members don’t fancy leaving anyway. “The sad truth is that, aside from those who are offspring of two Order members, most youngsters joining our ranks were stolen from their parents. Provided with two new parents and a new identity, the only thing left is the broken heart of their former. Thus, they subconsciously perceive the Order as a replacement for their family. I myself have no idea who my biological parents are. The LNO is a societal structure which is very closed in. The Order is their family, work, love life, and social circle. Maybe I’m an exception to that, but during my early twenties, an internal voice began to speak to me, questioning our beliefs and customs.”

Ugo picked up a tiny green garnish water jug to irrigate one of his little cactus plants, perfectly matching the desert-themed living room. “I was surrounded by people who were raised to feel superior to others, self-righteous, deluded. But outside of their ostentatious self-perception, it’s really just abominable. Imagine trusting a giant banished into the inner earth for his wrongdoings and wholeheartedly believing that he wants to change things for the better. If they’re able to carry out their plan and break the necessary secrecy around us magical orders, then it’s going to tarnish the image of witchcraft and mages as a whole in a very uncomfortable hue. This is why I’ll help you.” While Tim listened intently to Hugo’s words, Sharon’s eyes were brimming with unshed tears. She felt compassion for those children who had been pressed into the LNO’s ranks, but didn’t allow herself to appear weak in front of her fellow magicians. “It’s refreshing to hear that at least one of them broke through this pattern of indoctrination. You’re probably a well of insight concerning the Order. Yet in order to achieve

anything, we must find the Pillar of Light. I'm sure the LNO has its own theory about the pillar's location, maybe even looks forward to launching an expedition."

Hugo Mispel stood up, walking through the small living room in contemplative circles, his thoughtful tone reflecting his mood. "The plan of dimming sunlight by manipulating the Pillar of Light is nothing new, but when it comes to details, most members like me only know snippets. Only the bigwigs have precise instructions. The procedure starts with finding and weakening the Pillar of Light, a delicate business considering that too much force would not just dim it, but nearly drench us in total darkness. The spell in question is 'Rammo Wallon', usually used to demolish a structure, like tearing down a wall, for example. As soon as the sunlight is dim enough for its rays not to hurt Munrir, he will ascend from his cave near the Czech border. Again, I don't know the exact location." He strutted towards the balcony, and through the glass door, Hugo observed the main thoroughfare, a tapestry of brisk activity.

"An archaic giant escorted by a horde of magicians, all during a never-ending eclipse, is an image that would make most people question their understanding of reality. Regardless of whether one comes from a spiritual background or is an atheist, I expect people to split into three groups. One will do anything to eliminate the threat, another will follow him as some sort of god figure walking the earth. A third party will do nothing but try to survive it. How numerous each faction will turn out to be is hard to guess. But what's certain is that this time will be one of prolonged suffering and sheer uncertainty." Tim's memory painted a vivid picture, reminding him of the Domian show last night. "Would actions to cause perplexity as some sort of prelude fit their style of planning? Let's say something like UFOs roaming through the skies." Hugo turned around, facing Tim and Sharon once more. "I saw it last night while observing the stars. Apparently, Karl Surt has finally risen to become their High Staffwielder." "Bloody bahookie, who's that?" Sharon interjected in a charged tone.

"A fellow order member who arrived in the year 1980 alongside me. As we grew up, he was made fun of since his mind was often stuck in the clouds. While most magicians upheld a rather traditionalist style, he was totally captivated by futuristic concepts, spaceships, lean shiny white buildings. I won't lie, he wasn't more nefarious than others as a core villain, more of a crazy scientist kind of guy. To answer the question directly, yes, it would fit their plan like a glove. Especially if it came from him." "At least now we know who we're dealing with," Tim remarked. "Let's not forget the pillar of light, every minuscule hand could help us gain the upper hand." "Ah yes, the scarcely known resonance body enhancing the effect of sunlight. Me knowing it would mean the entire LNO knew as well, and we wouldn't be here theorising. But there is something that's caught my curiosity quite firmly. An alternative realm one can enter by climbing up a metal ladder of an older tunnel that once belonged to the Well of the Three, an order formerly responsible for our region before the TFF was established. Assuming the myth is true, one would end up in a realm mirroring an eternal library. Further, the myth explains that it's run by a giant. This aspect really made a cascade of shivers run down my spine."

"The reason behind it is that Munrir's long-not-seen twin brother, Beldon, is believed to have abandoned his malicious sibling long ago and found sanctuary in a remote library." With a piercing noise, the apartment's front door crashed to the ground. Two intruders burst in, wearing tactical vests, their faces masked by balaclavas and headbands depicting the LNO's pickaxe, wand and broom. Their wands were threateningly aimed at the trio. "Ah... a traitor conspiring with two enemies. Youngsters these days would call it an 'oh baby a triple', wouldn't they?" What they hadn't counted on was Sharon's aptitude for spellwork. Seconds dragged by as she drew her Japanese maple wand, tucked into her scrunchie. She conjured the spell "Bliksmeduz" onto Hugo's beloved hi-fi system. A lightning bolt shot from her wand, causing the electronic equipment to explode, sending fragments flying towards their opponents. A moment later, Martin and Miko stormed into the room. "It's an ambush, at least a dozen of

them, let's retreat," the young Japanese witch shouted. The first thought was to use the lift, but Tim interrupted. "Wait, folks, it could be sabotaged. Take the bloody stairs."

The decision proved wise, as almost the moment he finished speaking, the lift doors opened to reveal more LNO members. Hugo, Tim, Sharon, Miko and Martin raced down the stairs as fast as they could, until Miko spotted an opening in the wall exposing a water pipe. She kicked it with all the force her body could muster, sending masses of water gushing from the estate's pipe system. Miko conjured the freezing spell "Kori ni koru", turning the stair behind them into a slippery field of ice. More lightning, fireballs and ice projectiles followed them, but they finally made it out. The danger hadn't passed. A UFO approached at low altitude. Multiple barely visible rays extended from the exotic aircraft, striking the apartment building. "Into the trees!" Martin screamed, just before he threw a bottle of invisibility onto the ground like a smoke grenade. Their adversaries must have cast a ramming spell at the building, as the multitude of cracks spreading across it caused it to collapse with a fierce rumbling.
"They must have followed us," Tim Meyer whispered conspiratorially as the calamity concluded.

Chapter fourteen – A gentle Giant

It must be seen as an utter miracle that none of the apartment building's inhabitants were harmed during its collapse. People who had flats on the upper floors were either at work or outside enjoying the summer sun, while another fraction were most likely already on holiday. Nevertheless, it doesn't change the fact that around twenty-five people suddenly became homeless, their furniture reduced to rubble. Yet this occurrence wasn't like the explosion within Martin's space, people clearly saw the UFO approaching, an eldritch image to the public eye. Unlike prior sightings, this time it was even caught on camera. An individual retelling obscure encounters on Domian was nothing unusual, but an openly witnessed spaceship attack most certainly was. Such a blatant and dreadful violation of regional peace simply

couldn't go unanswered. It didn't take long for the regional administration to take action. The German government secured multiple assurances from other states so that the possibility of an act of war could be safely ruled out.

This was how the extra-terrestrial task force was established, consisting of military units focused primarily on anti-air defence and surveillance, supported by multiple police elements and, naturally, the secret service. The place where the apartment once proudly stood was cleared of debris. Shortly after, the very same perimeter served as a concentration point for anti-air systems addressing both long- and short-range threats. Not in their wildest dreams could the troops stationed there have known how close the base from which the UFOs took off truly was. Never would they have come to the conclusion that these flying objects were powered by nothing but brooms and manned by magicians. The possibility of them simply vanishing into thin air with the help of invisibility potions was a concept far beyond their comprehension. Yet there was a force not bound by non-magical perception, namely, the TFF.

An emergency meeting took place inside their secret headquarters, the exact location of which, up to this point, remained a secret to everyone except Theo and Martin. Around its centrally positioned table gathered Tim Meyer, Sharon Waterfield, Sato Miko, Martin Fink, Lopt Slygod, Richard Midländer, Hugo Mispel, and their cryptic yet fearless High Staffwielder, Theo. Pensively, he brushed his fingers through his braided beard as Tim recaptured everything that had happened over the course of the last three weeks onto a canvas drawn in the shape of a mind map. He appeared to be in a state of contemplative ecstasy, with a feverish focus comparable to that of a detective. The intricate alignment of incidents, facts and theories stretched across the white canvas until it bore an uncanny resemblance to an eccentric scientist's blueprint. Eventually, Tim ended up being the only one who retained any real overview of his brainchild.

"To sum it all up, last Saturday's attack will remain engrained in the public mind for at least decades to come. The only thing we can do now is damage control. Therefore, each second that passes by inevitably

causes more chaos and destruction. The falsified space invasion must be a prelude to the LNO's greater plan. Whatever we do, it must happen as soon as possible."

Martin abruptly interrupted the planning, his voice marked by an unexpected strictness that allowed no room for argument. *"Before we work on the next steps, did everybody leave their mobile phone at the entrance? We can't be sure they aren't already hacked. Better safe than sorry, right?"* Each member nodded emphatically. Theo's hands pressed against the table, his forehead furrowed. "*Hasty action usually isn't typical for us magicians, but Tim is right. We have to get our act together before we completely lose our grasp on this situation."* A sudden thrill of euphoria rushed through him as he recalled a discussion he had shared with Dennis's uncle Fricco, one that perfectly corroborated Hugo's assumption. A widening smile amplified the emotion further. *"There is indeed an old mine, formerly owned by The Well of the Three, which could be the library entrance Hugo speaks of. One turn right on the main road before Nornenbach, then keep driving upwards until a parking area comes into sight. You must cross the street and walk a few yards into the woods."*

The Task Force members glanced at each other with budding optimism. They were slowly starting to feel that the tide might be shifting, that they were now closer than ever to gaining the upper hand. "*It's been called the Jacobs Quarry..."* Theo continued his explanation. "*It's slightly overgrown, but you'll find it. Tim, Sharon and Richard will be commissioned for this mission."* The High Staff wielder turned his gaze to the other members with ambition. *"Miko, Martin and Hugo, you'll set up a fundraising campaign for those who lost their belongings when the building collapsed. We can use this as a sham to donate from our own treasury, at least to compensate for what the Lancers have done. Lopt, you'll stay by my side at the base as a quick reaction force."*

Following their instructions, the quarry contingent made their way towards the abandoned and long-forgotten mine. Midländer's Mercedes 180 invisibility gadget had been further improved by an even

larger selectable fuel tank, allowing the trio to remain completely unseen for the entire trip. Not an entirely risk-free endeavour, considering the number of vehicles he had to dodge, since those drivers couldn't see Richard's vehicle, they didn't treat it as a driving obstacle. Luckily, traffic this Monday wasn't that brisk. One right turn up a road, meandering through the ever-present dense canopy of dark needle trees, led to the parking area in question. Richard Midländer opened the car door and took in a deep breath of the earthy, fragrant summer breeze which suddenly rustled through the brightly illuminated Black Forest as if intending to welcome them. *"This must be the right location. But honestly, why in Gullveig's golden treasures is there a parking area randomly situated here? It feels so out of place, doesn't it?"* Tim Meyer guided his Norwegian friend over the gravel-stone area towards a large wooden sign framing a map of hiking paths. *"See, it's a point of gathering where hikers can start their journey. That's why,"* Tim explained, with the self-assured tone of someone armed with local knowledge. Sharon swiftly realised their lack of focus and pulled on Tim's sleeve to draw him back. *"We're here on a mission, don't you remember?"* Tilting her head rightwards, she indicated at an overgrown dirt road. The remains of uneven stone walls on either side of the path further confirmed that this peculiar track must once have held at least some sort of importance, otherwise, no one would have constructed it.

The path that continuously faded into the dark woods beyond both looked and felt like an entrance into something older than oneself. It wouldn't be wrong to describe it as an estuary, beginning with an ominous invitation and steadily leading into an ocean of mystery. The trio's steps were careful, rich in attentiveness. Vivid and fresh were the memories of the LNO's last ambush, they had struck suddenly, appearing and vanishing as if from thin air. This was why Richard and Sharon already had their wands drawn, ready to cast a deadly storm of spells. Sharon Waterfield was fully immersed in her role as a powerful witch, not much now remained of the young girl who had once studied computer science at Napier University. Richard Midländer was a soul well acquainted with things like shapeshifting and alternative realms. The only one who felt slightly out of place was Tim Meyer. Despite being a calm, strategic mind, his lack of magical powers momentarily weighed on his mood. His fleeting gloom was

swiftly interrupted by Richard's complaint. "*Dude, the Black Forest really does justice to its name here, it's hacking dark."* Sharon, although being a Scot, defended the archaic wood of her new home region. *"Usually it's not even remotely that dark.*" However, her concern also grew, palpable in her voice and the usual thickening of her accent. *"It's so gloomy here, I guess people don't really favour this pathway."*

#

Unanticipated, Tim's eyes caught sight of a distant light, starkly contrasting against the foreboding darkness. It broke through an old copper door that led into the mine. *"Ladies and gentlemen, guess what? We've found it."* With the ecstatic rush of a discoverer's eagerness, he sprinted towards the entrance, leaving both Richard and Sharon dumbfounded by his fearlessness. Tim used all his strength to open the gate. Finally, after a stubborn pull, it gave way. Richard Midländer willingly entered first, casting circumspect glances inside. *"Well, Timanchamun, congrats to you. Now we simply have to follow the source of the beam." "Will you ever stop abusing my name?"* Tim inquired, the annoyance in his voice unmistakable. *"I don't know, but what I do know is that there's some sort of ladder integrated into the rock face."* Richard pointed at a delicately structured ladder forged from finely polished gold.

Observant, he aimed his birch wand upwards at the ladder. *"Skinan brathin,"* he uttered, using it to illuminate the manhole. *"I see, one of those entrances,"* the peculiar Norwegian commented. *"What do you mean by 'those entrances,' Riccardo?"* Tim inquired, bewildered by the cryptic statement. *"Usually..."* Richard began to explain, his wand continuously glinting into the dark abyss. *"Entrances into different realms are marked by opening a gate, stepping over a doorstep, anything that involves overcoming a physical barrier. Yet rarely, exceedingly rarely, are there those where you have to keep entering without passing an obstacle. Which means, in our case, climbing up this ladder until we hopefully reach the library. Let me lead the stepped expedition."* The golden ladder, glistening in its bright golden hue, contrasted perfectly with the pitch-black darkness, just like the light it radiated far into the forest's path. One might imagine the bewilderment of an individual stumbling upon this otherworldly

setting by coincidence. Richard went up first, closely followed by the other two, Tim Meyer once more confronted with yet another of his weaknesses. Unbeknownst to most people, Tim was afraid of heights. Not that he grew giddy or faint, but rather felt a strong urge to avoid proximity to any perceived danger. Yet this moment demanded he confront these worries, since remaining idle and allowing the collapse of an entire planet's ecosystem was far more terrifying than any steep depth. At some point, the anxiety was overcome by focusing solely on each step and nothing more, even though the climb seemed maddeningly endless. Richard Midländer eventually discovered solid ground.

"Guys, you won't believe this, looks like it's out of a dream, like the gates of heaven!" he shouted downwards in euphoric astonishment. Indeed, he wasn't wrong, for at the ladder's upper end, a scenic place bordered by white fluffy clouds came into sight. Centred by a cobblestone street, to its left and right one would gaze in awe at a vibrant green meadow, fringed by picturesque rose bushes. The pleasing presence of the rose's scent underlined this unexpected, impeccable idyll.

"Look at that arch over there. If my eyes aren't deceiving me, it looks like there are large bookcases just behind it," Sharon remarked, spellbound by what she saw. The arch she described was made of refined sandstone and embellished with a composition of symbols known from various cultures across the world. It stood as an architectural melting pot, preserving mankind's cultural heritage.
With each careful step they took beyond the monolithic arch, a baffling sight unfolded. The library's floor was half set with chessboard-patterned tiles, the other half carpeted with vibrant green fields. Many trees inhabited the area, some youthful, bubbling with insatiable life, others older, towering with deep, strong roots. They stood venerably, like kings of old depicted in portraits. Besides the hues of green and brown, in all their lighter and darker shades, two other colours dominated: a shining gold and an elegant black. For some reason, the hints of a highly advanced civilisation blended seamlessly with the panoramic sincerity of untouched nature, almost as if it was all meant to be. The trio passed through this captivating

landscape, astonishment clearly palpable in their gazes. Tim Meyer retrained his focus on the mission at hand. *"Let's not lose track, people. Beldon must be somewhere."* Sharon Waterfield frowned suspiciously. *"Let's hope he doesn't look too monstrous. We've seen enough daunting things this summer."* Nearly uncomfortable correcting Sharon, Richard replied, *"I don't like being the bearer of bad news, but giants usually look terrifying."*

The sudden sound of plangent, noisy footsteps announced the approach of something huge and heavy. *"Visitors?"* a deep yet welcoming voice enquired curiously. *"Well, seems like I was wrong,"* Richard proclaimed, and the reason was obvious. Instead of a frightening abomination, there stood a gentle giant. He looked neither old nor young, his face was mature, yet somehow youthful. Benevolence radiated from his golden, glimmering eyes. His long golden hair gently cascaded down his back, and his beard was well-trimmed. A handsome giant came as a surprise to everyone. In fact, his appearance was so striking that Tim momentarily considered covering Sharon's eyes, fearing she might fall for the enchanting newcomer. He stepped forward, taking on the role of the group's representative.

"Yes, visitors from a force called TFF, constituted and founded by the Four Magi. Our aim is to save the planet from a nefarious threat." "Say no more, young man," the impressive fifteen-foot-tall giant replied, the bookcases to his left and right surpassing him in height. "*My self-absorbed brother, this ruddy ignoramus plans to dim the sunlight? This selfish fool has no idea about the consequences. I tried to speak sense into him, yet he neither wanted to listen nor understood. Tell me, how can I assist you?"* This time, Sharon Waterfield replied. *"Dear Beldon, a prophecy has spread throughout the minds of the most influential heads of wizard society. It states Tim and I must cast a protective charm onto the Pillar of Light. Hence, we need to know its location."* Beldon leaned against an enormous oak tree and considered silently. The wisdom he protected was invaluable and shouldn't be shared with just anyone. *"Fine, but only one of you will be taken to the Holy of Holies. I'll pick him."* Beldon pointed his index finger at Tim Meyer. *"Follow me, the others will guard the entrance."*

Up a widely stretched hill, the young German and the giant walked. Still, their surroundings were marked by a unique blend of vibrant nature and a grand scholarly library. Tim couldn't help but wonder. *"How does this lovely park-like structure collaborate with all these ancient tomes? I've never seen anything comparable."* With a warm voice, Beldon answered his inquiry. "*Usually, we perceive wilderness and civilisation as contradictions, but here it's oddly matched, isn't it? I tend to refer to this place as the earth's long-term memory. Regardless of which insight you're looking for, you'd definitely find it here. To your bewilderment, none of these bookcases was crafted by hand but by the trees themselves. Once, their roots stretched out and formed these cabinets. They can even pass books over to you."* Confidently, he walked over to a walnut tree, asking it to hand over a volume of Indian astrology. A branch of the tree began to transform into the shape of a human hand, made out of wood. With a creaking sound, it passed over the volume. Again, Tim Meyer found himself baffled. The short journey continued. The further they walked, the more a dimly lit evening atmosphere prevailed. It felt soothing and utterly disconcerting. Tim felt inclined to hum the melody of one of his favourite chill rap tracks. Beldon found it rather amusing.

"*Rap is music about struggle and the triumph over it. But you use it to calm the mind, like it is some sort of melodious sedative,"* he commented with interest. Tim chuckled, as he had never seen it from that angle. But what really overwhelmed him was the presence of the colossal ash tree. Perched on the highest point, its crown reached deep into the stars. The immense size of this ancient plant was oppressive. It demanded the observer's eye to marvel at its magnificence and inevitably stirred one to ponder its ineffable scale compared to oneself. The image of an eternal tree, which made even giants appear as ants in comparison, was too majestic for even the best painter to capture on canvas. Surrounded by six monolithic bookshelves, it was indeed the library's marvellous centrepiece. Tim Meyer was at a loss for words to describe its solemn presence. Beldon tapped his shoulder to comfort him. *"I know it's a lot to take in, perhaps the most imposing sight in every realm. There it is, the book in question."* From one of the pieces of furniture, he retrieved a heavy old tome, adorned with gold and

jewellery. *"It's written in an ancient language. Let me translate it."* Beldon's eyes scanned each word like an intrinsic code.

"There we go, that's the paragraph we need." Beldon cleared his throat to properly recite the old text. "*Thou shalt be trusted with wisdom, that as I assembled the heavens and the earth, two solid columns have been raised. One that thee beings find rest, the other that sunlight may shine upon to nurture thine soil. Us venerated heavenly judges allowed Menes to raise his capital upon."* Tim Meyer raised an eyebrow. After hearing the old tome's writing, he found himself even more confused.
"Erm, sorry but what? Who is Menes and which capital is the script talking about?"
The gentle giant with his golden-coloured hair carefully replaced the book in its case. *"Most people wouldn't understand it, I don't blame you. You've probably already gathered that there are basically two pillars. One boosts the sun's warmth and brightness, the other coordinates the earth's circulation. They're finely tuned, with a precision that is pivotal for the earth's ecosystem. Later on, it talks about the first capital of Menes, often believed to be a mythical founder of Egypt's first dynasty."*

"Today, most scholars inconclusively identify him with Narmer, the first pharaoh who established his capital at what we now know as Memphis, Egypt." Tim's demeanour shifted into that of a scientist on the verge of a breakthrough, his eyes widening frantically. "*That brings us much further. The only thing we need is to find an entrance, which could be anywhere…"* His words trailed off into an intermittent rush of disappointment. "*Indeed..."* Beldon remarked. *"It could lie amidst the ruins or even be covered by sand under a dune. You may trust your intuition or a prophetic dream if you're really lucky*." *"Let's get back to the others, I can't wait to inform them,"* Tim Meyer pressed impatiently.
The way back seemed far shorter than before, perhaps his earlier anticipation had tangibly slowed down time. A few metres away from Sharon and Richard, Beldon stopped him. *"Hey Tim, I'd like to bid you farewell."* The giant offered his hand, which Tim gladly accepted. *"Be careful out there. Keep an eye on your companions and your love interest."* A coy smirk graced Tim's face. Part of him was surprised by

Beldon's perceptiveness, the other open to a casual talk between men. "*You're quite perceptive, aren't you? But do you think I have a chance?"* he noted, slightly taken aback. "*You don't need a Rosetta Stone to decipher that you and Sharon would make a good couple. Goodbye, Mr Meyer." "Goodbye, Beldon,"* Tim answered.

#

Back with his friends, he hastily bubbled out all the information and images he had absorbed. The process took all the way until they found themselves outside the mine again. *"Blimey, Timoshenko, I need to document that down ASAP. This library isn't even mentioned yet under the listed realms."*
His Norwegian friend, resorting to the familiar name-bending, forced Tim's caution to snap back to his predictable reality. *"Sounds feasible, mate, although we should enlighten the others beforehand. We mustn't lose valuable time. Of course, we have the opportunity at hand right now, but God knows for how long."* Occupied by their vivid planning, they only now realised that night had already unfolded. Through the star-filled sky roamed two UFOs, a sight promising nothing good to come. The melodic chirping of crickets now added to the conspiratorial atmosphere lingering around them. Things were about to get serious.

Chapter fifteen – Countless eerie Stars

Visibly stricken by nervousness, Richard dropped off Tim and Sharon at their dimly lit lair. *"Quick, get into the house before anyone sees us. The invisibility potion tank is almost empty. Wishing you the best of luck, as you'll need it."* He closed the car window, and through the final seconds before it shut completely, a faint *"Take care, Richard"* from Tim was audible. Fast steps led the two into the apartment. One after the other, they invigorated body and mind with a cold shower. Though this procedure usually refreshed one's senses, it simply wasn't enough to shake off the exhaustion. Sharon Waterfield yawned and stretched languidly. "*I think I can't hold it back much longer. But how can I catch some sleep whilst those bloody spaceships could strike at any minute?"* Sharon's internal dilemma was

clearly tangible in her voice. Tim shared those concerns, casting a pensive gaze at the world outside his window, where the crickets still went on with their insistent chirping. *"Alright, if it doesn't bother you, we can both sleep in this room. One of us watches the sky while the other sleeps, then after an hour or so we switch."* Sharon met this suggestion with visible relief playing on her face.

So the tension-charged night began, with the first hour unfolding uneventfully. The moonlight shone brighter than usual, making it easy to observe the deceitful peace outside. Kühltal's nightly tranquillity made the full moon appear as an overly inflated sign of upcoming trouble that could easily be dismissed. A stray ray of its light illuminated the peacefully slumbering Sharon, especially those few freckles her cheek boasted. It could be seen as a discouraging irony of fate that his wish of being so close to her had finally been fulfilled, but in a constellation of circumstances he had never asked for.
It strongly reminded Tim of a dream he'd once had. Within the lucid dreamscape he had conjured a sports car, which during the dream's duration slowly transformed into nothing more than a toy car. In the very same manner, Sharon now lay in his sheets, but he had to stay awake and observe the sky. Regardless of his mild disappointment, he at least found solace in seeing how contentedly his Scottish sorceress slept.

Tim threw a swift glance at his watch, quarter past midnight. Apparently, his shift had finally ended. With fatigue clearly written on his face, he gently woke Sharon. *"Wake up, my witch. Luckily, nothing has happened. Now it's your turn."* She stretched once more, ready to relieve Tim from his self-imposed guard duty, when words filled with utmost bewilderment shattered the nightly idyll.
"*Those are spaceships! Are the aliens about to subjugate us? I always knew they existed, I always did!"*
Young and old stormed outside. Tim's gaze instantly shifted to the horizon, quickly followed by Sharon. What they saw was enough to make one's blood run cold. The night sky was crammed with UFOs, slowly moving in an imposing formation. *"I'm speechless. Does the LNO really have this many spaceships in store?"* Tim Meyer asked, confounded. Infected by the moment's communal perplexity, the young

witch's Scottish accent thickened, enough to make any Highlander blush. *"It's not ending. I'm afraid we're completely outnumbered by them. It's discouraging. A real space armada manned by mages."*

Tim draped his arm around Sharon, far from any flirtatious attempt, far more an expression of shared concern, enveloping her in a protective cocoon. *"These Lancers have probably summoned all their members to appear numerous. A trick as old as time itself. Within the prophetic dream where Vanadis revealed Martin to be a wizard, she stated that out of four thousand people, around twenty can be considered magical folk. If you deduct all the other clans, we can conclude that it's simply impossible for them to outnumber us."* Sharon Waterfield leaned into his embrace, sending a jolt rushing through his veins. The unholy procession of power continued, with none of the extraterrestrial taskforce's air defence systems firing a single shot. Perhaps not a single soul wanted to be the one to start a war with an unknown alien civilisation. The LNO's deception seemed to work like a well-oiled machine.
Out of nowhere, some of the UFOs dropped handouts. A rain of slowly falling paper dominated the scene, followed by three loud explosions. Those deafening, thunderous blasts elicited screams from the observers.

By the first explosion, Tim and Sharon instinctively took cover behind the wall beneath the window sill. Sharon, now keen on spells and well accustomed to magic, swiftly figured out that lightning had been cast. *"The Bliksmeduz charm! It's possible to cast them as a group, which makes it much more potent." "Now I see how they're demolishing entire buildings in one go."* The dropping of handouts, along with those three resounding blasts, promised nothing good for this daunting night. Concern was etched into both Tim's and Sharon's faces. *"Get your wand, Sharon. We should dress in something hooded. I think some scouting is in order to get a better picture of what's really happening here."*

Hastily, Tim Meyer and his witch threw on some covering clothes and ran down the stairs. *"Let's stay a bit further away from the epicentre, especially now. We need to move carefully,"* Sharon suggested in a tone that left no room for argument, sincere worry lacing her voice.

#

The first glance upwards revealed that the futuristic armada had finally passed by. People from Tim's neighbourhood flooded the streets, skittishly picking up the sham alien's handouts. A strong night wind delivered one directly into Tim's reach, almost as if it were addressing him personally. *"What does it say, Tim?"* Sharon pressed, brimming with anticipation. Initially, his eyes skimmed the text, but his witch's demand for clarification led him to read it aloud in full. *"Dear citizens, you may find yourselves asking who this spellbinding armada of spaceships belongs to. We expect to be met with a healthy amount of scepticism, most understandably so. However, there is nothing to be worried about. On the contrary, it's time for you to celebrate. Yes, we do come from another, far more advanced civilisation compared to yours, but we are thoroughly human beings, trespassing your horizon in goodwill. For far too long, we have observed how unequal and mismanaged your wonderful planet has become. Time is up now for us to chivalrously liberate you. Of course, this demands the deconstruction of any kind of state administration. The only thing we ask you to do is stay calm, enjoy the show, and prepare for your well-deserved liberation. Signed by Lancers of the New Order, your friends, your fellow humans albeit not from planet Earth."*

A sharp gasp emphasised Sharon Waterfield's dismay at the LNO's audacity. She was teetering between being strongly appalled by the falsehood of this charade and amused by the paradox of their situation. She couldn't contain a sarcastic laughter. *"That's gallus of them, first frightening everybody with an eerie space armada right before playing the role of a benevolent saviour. However..."* Swiftly, her demeanour changed to one of concern. "*Many people could still fall for their tricks*." Her sudden worry proved to be contagious for Tim. *"You're probably right. Our society is far from flawless. The thought of a powerful liberator can sound appealing to a lot of folks out there."* Tim Meyer placed his

hand on her shoulder. "*Let's catch at least some sleep. Tomorrow, we'll have a meeting with the others, I suppose."* Despite the thrilling situation at hand, Sharon couldn't deny that sleep was exactly what she needed. So both of them returned to the apartment and finally concluded the day.

#

The very next morning, during breakfast, Tim and Sharon's phones vibrated vividly, the result of last night's events. Ultimately, High Staffwielder Theo had decided that a meeting was in order to discuss further steps, yet there was a catch. Given Tim and Sharon's importance in the greater scheme of things, he strictly advised them to stay under the radar for the following day. Tim Meyer and his Scottish witch felt like they were being dragged into a Cold War-era spy movie. Every correctly made step promised an advantage over their enemies, while each mishap could badly backfire. Fortunately, there was a solution in the shape of an ancient communication technique not often used by magicians, though widely known. All they needed was a local fire, whether a campfire, fireball, or chimney, specific runes chiselled into a stone tablet, and a drink to extinguish the fire. The key was to use the same liquid and the same symbols as the people they wanted to communicate with. This would set the enchantment in motion and foster the connection. From the mist steaming up the hissing fire, one should clearly see and hear the people using the exact same procedure. Lopt Slygod had come up with this witty solution. One might say he had really done his homework. Tim found himself a flat stone amidst the gooseberry bushes in his parents' garden.

The fire bowl seated on his balcony, originally meant to provide a homely source of atmosphere, was about to be turned into a magical means of communication. Working with her wand had become a soft touch for Sharon Waterfield. She simply pointed her exotic Japanese piece of maple wood at the target and spoke the charm, "*Daga flioustran."* The firewood and stone were not the only necessary preparations. They had also set up a wall of corrugated iron to shield themselves from prying eyes. An armada of UFOs was already enough for the small town to deal with, wizards communicating through fog and fire might have been the final straw. That was by far not the only threat, since their enemy's ravens

remained a danger as well, one which shouldn't be forgotten. *"The fire is steadily burning, now it's time for the chisel. You're up to the task?"* Sharon tilted her head ever so slightly and pouted her lips. *"Only in theory, I've never tried this particular enchantment before. I'm simply doing my best. Would you show me the page explaining the process in detail?"*

Tim helped her understand the elaborate carving, clearly depicted in their useful spellbook. "*It's somewhat similar to the time portal we did when we were trapped in the eighteen hundreds. First, draw a large circle on the ground with a wand, seven times counter-clockwise. Then, at its upper end, we need the runes for higher forces, primal energy, and flow of energy, stacked. That's the first step."* *"Got you,"* Sharon Waterfield replied with a thumbs-up. With the help of a charm called "*Karbana in,"* her wand's tip released strongly compressed air, strong and precise enough to remove material from the stone. Impressed by her precision, Tim's eyes widened. "*Well done, fine work, mason,"* he remarked. "*Now, in a radiant style, use the runes for need, men, flow, and season.*" Sharon nodded and began to carve the runes in question. The strong recoil of the wand forced her to stabilise her vibrating hand. Debris of splintered stone forced Tim, who hadn't considered wearing eye protection, to turn away. Nevertheless, against the odds of inexperience, the circle began to glow. "*If I'm not wrong, now it's time to add the password and the drink. Look it up in the group chat."* A quick glance at Broomracer 101 revealed that the password was rain season, and the liquid in question was apple juice. Once carved, placed amidst the fire, and extinguished with the juice, a clear picture arose from the flames.

Within the mirage, the faces of Lopt, Theo, Richard, Martin, Miko, and Hugo appeared. The Taskforce Fir's commander began, his tone deeply serious due to the possible implications of the next steps, and mildly commanding. "*Before we start, let's keep our voices low. Depending on where we are, others might hear you, keep that in mind. Before stating anything, raise your wand to check if my voice is being properly transmitted."* From the upper left, Lopt raised a comb, which he used to bend his curly

black hair. *"Just to make sure we're all on the same page, everyone familiar with the incident that happened last night, including those handouts they dropped?"* A collective nod confirmed his inquiry. Now it was Sharon's turn to speak, her voice dropping to a whisper. *"Obviously, they're rallying for public support. It's a dichotomy, intimidating with their spaceship while playing the benevolent saviour. Plus, they've taken out the town hall, police station, and this air defence bastion in one strike. Nevertheless, if the public feels inclined to accept them, we're in major trouble."*

"Not necessarily," Martin countered, hopeful. *"Their armada crossed over the French border, heading towards Paris. A fierce air battle erupted, and some UFOs were shot down by the French fighters. Although it's really hard to track them with heat-seekers, since they don't have turbines or engines. Some lucky shots apparently hit them, meaning they're in no sense invincible, even if the French lost fighters and systems."* Tim Meyer threw a curious glance as he noticed Miko standing next to his friend Martin. Now the Japanese witch took her turn. "*Aside from this, Tim and Sharon can still shield the pillar of light with a protective charm. Remember, they need to dim sunlight to fulfil their plan. Otherwise, they can spook around as much as they want."* Everybody struggled to contain a chuckle at hearing the LNO's campaign of intimidation being verbally reduced to *"spooking around."* It profoundly softened the atmosphere. Once more, Theo spoke. *"Tim and Sharon, soon you'll be heading over to Memphis, Egypt. Richard Midländer has already informed me about the knowledge you've gathered at Beldon's library. I'll expect you at headquarters at nine hundred hours tomorrow morning."*

Without making a sound that might have warned the two of the swiftly approaching danger, a single spaceship hurtled towards the Meyer's house. A threat about to carve a drastic change into Tim's life. Two thunderous lightning bolts struck deep into the building. The walls collapsed, and Tim and Sharon found themselves in a terrifying free fall as the balcony crumbled beneath them. Tim's heartbeat surged, his adrenaline must have spiked beyond measure, violently torn from his illusion of safety. A glance to the right revealed his parents, two people he had only recently realised he'd spent far too little

time with, buried under rubble. Sharon swiftly grasped the severity of what had occurred, a tear of compassion running down her cheek. Tim Meyer's eyes brimmed with unshed tears. Despite the storm of barely containable emotions surging within him, he held them back. Instead, an uncontrollable rage emerged. He seized Sharon's oriental wand, aimed it at one of the retreating UFOs, and shouted with fierce aggression, *"Frusna iz aisa!"* The doom-bearing spaceship froze into a solid block of ice and crashed into the woods with a deafening sound. This was not only the first time Tim had struck down an enemy, but far more significantly and to anyone's surprise, he had conjured a charm.

Sharon Waterfield was utterly perplexed by Tim's sudden acquisition of magical powers, yet that was of secondary importance to her in that moment. She wrapped her arms around him, cocooning him in a calming embrace, creating a new safe space after the tragic loss of his home and family. Unable to speak, he simply sat there, panting heavily. It was now up to Sharon Waterfield to soothe him. The usual challenging sass she carried had given way to warmth and compassion. Gently, she brushed her nose against his neck, hoping to offer comfort and calm. *"They will pay, Timmy. Those gangsters have now revealed their true faces. I know we had a rocky start and our behaviour toward each other was rather complicated, but trust me, from now on, we're a galvanised force. Nothing shall tear us apart."*
Tim Meyer had to swallow hard, releasing the last of his shock and the lingering remnants of anger in quiet meditation. At last, he regained control over his emotions and took Sharon Waterfield in a firm embrace. *"I believe you, and from now on I'm more determined than ever to complete our mission."*
For the first time in both of their lives, Tim and Sharon found themselves homeless. It had been especially challenging for Tim Meyer, as he had lost almost all of his possessions. Only his letter opener, phone, and a set of clothes remained undamaged. The removal of the ruins and the remains of his parents was handled by the remaining institutions. Yet, there was a faint light at the end of this dark tunnel, as the TFF once again proved to be an unshakable rock for its members. Theo had managed to arrange a long-term rental at one of the most exquisite hotels Forstquelle had to offer. Its first floor was adorned in splendid marble, with a blend of gold and red elements making its interior distinctive. The hotel boasted a

style of rather traditional luxury, from a time when people in top hats and ladies in long dresses with richly decorated hats entered for a stay. However, calling it outdated or obsolete would be a blatant misjudgement, as it had been constantly renovated and thoroughly maintained.

Tim Meyer stared, fully hypnotised, through the large hotel room window, not so much by the ongoing life outside, which seemed completely unfazed by the turmoil, but more by his own deep contemplations. Sharon Waterfield slowly walked up to him with a seemingly mundane bottle held in her hand. Eventually, Tim broke the prolonged silence, his gaze still fixed on the outside world.
"As a kid, I walked past this building so many times and thought I'd probably never see what it looked like from the inside. As a local, you don't really plan on doing a vacation in your neighbouring town."
The witty witch giggled warmly with all the playfulness the severe situation condoned.
"Life tends to bend its own narrative in unexpected ways. But what it indeed does is go on."
Now both of them threw an ogle at the callous tranquillity outside, until Sharon spoke up once more, claiming his attention. *"I have a surprise for you."* She passed the bottle to Tim, who wordlessly questioned it with a confused smirk. *"I noticed that sometimes you fancy cracking open a beer or two. This is a healthy alternative I found in our spellbook. It's simply a highly concentrated juicy consisting of elderberry and St John's wort that elicits a light-hearted mood without unwanted health consequences."*
The facial expression Tim delivered was filled with more sincere gratitude and affection than any statement could carry. *"Company concerned about oneself is the best to keep."*

Punctually at five minutes to nine the next morning, Tim and Sharon arrived at the Taskforce Fir's headquarters, surreptitiously located on the summit of the low ridge mountain. Chunky clouds, heavy with unreleased rain, loomed in the dark sky. At the start of his adventure on the ninth of July, Tim Meyer had hoped for nothing more than a serene, warm, and sunny season, far away from anything that might tarnish one's mood. That hope had already faded by the time he became acquainted with the responsibility fate had placed upon his and Sharon's shoulders. The warm summer he had wished for was

now in danger of drowning in rain. Yet everything has both its positive and negative aspects, as their movements were concealed by fog and darkness. Both were already familiar with the secret mechanism of the traditional cuckoo clock. Sharon therefore pulled the correct string exactly seven times. As soon as the door opened, High Staffwielder welcomed them. Behind his broad shoulders stood two vehicles veiled beneath cloaks.

"*Good day to you, fellow magicians,"* he greeted them, placing his hand on Tim's shoulder as many others had done before, offering comfort. *"We're all very sorry for your loss. Now you know what we're dealing with. Your witch told me you've already cast a spell?" "That's right. He cast the icing charm like a professional. I was utterly confounded myself,"* Sharon said with palpable pride. *"I'm not that surprised. It was only a matter of time. Being very close to someone with magical powers, especially under life, changing circumstances, can inadvertently awaken them. Most people who acquire powers in such a way are oblivious to it."* Sharon and Tim glanced at each other and blushed. *"What's under these cloaks?"* Tim inquired. *"These are your vehicles, commissioned for your journey to Egypt. Originally, we considered simple flying brooms, but those are hard to handle for beginners."* With a ceremonial flourish, Theo removed the fabric, revealing two objects that looked like a cross between motorbikes and snowmobiles, with hoods designed in the shape of horse heads. Tim Meyer and Sharon Waterfield raised their eyebrows, both impressed and bewildered.

Chapter Sixteen – Into an Ocean of Sand

Equipped with their new devices, Sharon and Tim, after an elaborate introduction by Theo that almost drained their entire attention span, began their first humble attempts to conquer the sky. Initially, it looked anything but professional, appearing rather gangly, as the daring team hovered more over the ground than actually flew. The brown-bearded High Staffwielder, Theo, quickly rushed back into the

building to gather some additional equipment. Aside from rain ponchos, he returned with two helmets that bore a noticeable resemblance to motorcycle helmets. *"You'll definitely have to expect rain on your journey to Egypt. And these helmets have integrated microphones and speakers. If you take a look at the sky scooters' interface, you'll notice some numbers to press. Number one connects you to each other, two to the headquarters, and every other can be used to save additional contacts as well."*

Tim Meyer couldn't resist the urge to try it out. Accidentally, he pressed number one and two simultaneously. *"Do you have a licence for that, my witch?"* Sharon Waterfield replied with her distinct, challenging smirk, though she wasn't the only one to answer. "*Fun fact, if you select two numbers at the same time, a group chat will be initiated."* The all-so-collected Tim felt palpably embarrassed and quickly changed the subject. "*Good to know. I see some storage compartments on my left and right sides, that'll surely be useful. What are these scooters even called? Do they have a name?" "They actually do. These variants are called Sleipnir Eight,"* the High Staffwielder replied. Sharon's quirky voice carried a new question into the discussion. *"What happened to Sleipnir One to Seven?" "Those were an array of prototypes,"* he explained. *"This entire concept builds on enchantments that tie the handlebar to three flying brooms housed inside the scooter. I'd be eating a broom if the LNO doesn't use the exact same concept on their UFOs."* Yet another hour of intense flight training passed, with them becoming quite adept at mastering their air scooters. Satisfied with their performance, Theo gave them the green light for their endeavour towards the town which was once Memphis, Egypt's ancient capital.

However, Tim Meyer insisted on attending his parents' funeral. It hadn't been long ago when he realised that the time he'd spent with them was far too little. The High Staffwielder agreed, aware of the gravity such a profound loss can have. *"I wish you two all the luck in this world. Perhaps the LNO's attacks have led us to a place of no return, and there is a need to reveal everything to our non-magical counterparts. Though until this becomes an inevitable step, the only thing we can and must do is to fulfil the prophecy. You must succeed, otherwise these dark clouds in the sky will be entering our history books*

as a dark omen. Regardless of what some people might think, we magicians are no vile force. Maybe we do have some specimen who're not the most jovial amongst people, but those are in the majority. This is what we have to prove now."

#

Exactly at twelve the next day, the funeral took place. A drizzle of rain perfectly matched the sorrowful atmosphere which dominated the cemetery and lasted for almost four hours. Sharon and his friends, nearly all of whom attended, stood there as the metaphorical rock he badly needed that day. Dressed all in black, even nine distant family members said their goodbyes to Alma and Klaus Meyer. A thousand tears leaving the assembly's eyes revealed that those two were at least not hated by many.
All of a sudden, a ray of sunlight broke through the clouds and illuminated the grave and Sharon Waterfield, whose hand he was constantly intertwined with. Whether she did so solely to emphasise her mental support, or ventured towards a new paradigm in their ambiguous relationship, remained unclear to Tim. A rainbow in the distance further lightened his mood. The odd dichotomy of the dark rain clouds looming over him and the prevailing rays of sunlight strongly reminded him of something. The moment unfolded like a metaphor for the Pillars of Light and Darkness, Sun and Moon, that Beldon had educated him about. Moved by the significance of this revelation, Tim threw a glance at Sharon, clearly brimming with budding hope for a brighter, a peaceful future.

Encouraged by this remote influx of hope and belonging and bolstered by a sense of responsibility, Tim and Sharon decided it would be best to begin their journey that very evening. Full of anticipation, they dialled the coordinates into their Sleipnir Eight air scooters' interface. Darkness had already taken hold of the sky by the time they reached the TFF headquarters, nestled on a low ridge mountain. Rain continued to fall. Fortunately, it was a warm summer rain, yet it remained a foreboding sign that things were about to become turbulent, if not outright stormy. Ponchos, helmets, coordinates,

food, water, and an inner readiness allowed Tim and Sharon to finally take off. Tim swiftly dialled channel one to communicate with Sharon. *"It's time to take off, Sharon. Let's stick to an altitude of one hundred and fifty metres as long as we're flying over woodland, that's roughly five hundred feet for you. If we cross over settlements, we'll raise the height to three hundred metres, a thousand feet. Should we be unlucky and encounter any of the Lancers' spaceships, I'll split to the left, you to the right, and we'll regroup at the next settlement on course." "Got you, Timmy!"* Sharon confirmed. "*We should also consider keeping radio silence, at least until we've reached the Mediterranean Sea. Clandestine secrecy. That way, no one can intercept us by our talking. Hear you over the waves again, Tim."*

Their navigation system provided a clear path to their ancient destination, and the pitch-black darkness offered solid cover. Constant improvements over previous models made flying even for the height-fearing Tim Meyer nearly enjoyable. Whoever had been in charge of the ergonomics had done a fantastic job. Sitting on the scooter evoked a sensation of becoming one with the machine.
Sharon, in particular, couldn't contain a smug smile throughout the ride. As a city lass, there had never been much need to get a driver's licence early, a luxury Tim couldn't relate to. Roaming so closely above the treeline, powered solely by magic, reminded her starkly that she was indeed a witch through and through. One should bear in mind that those air scooters, despite their sleek futuristic design, would simply be sitting ducks were it not for the brooms they contained.

Continuously crossing the foggy ocean, consisting of an endlessly black horizon, alongside the complete radio silence suggested and obeyed by Sharon, forced Tim to retreat into sincere reflection. He considered their task and its monolithic importance, which was fantastical enough for him to be seen as utterly deranged if he were ever to tell his story to an ordinary crowd of people. A studious university student and formerly a scoffing sceptic, from an age-old city far in the North West, and a countryside lad who hadn't seen much aside from woodlands and valleys, united in a mission to preserve something as

vital as the fragile balance of nature. He was very much teetering between being invested in their daring adventure and not losing himself in it, since he still dearly yearned for his normal life to return.

Despite the forests and fields below them brimming with nightlife, they appeared to be locked in a gentle slumber. But the silence was about to be violated and both were more than lucky to have followed Theo's advice in wearing rain ponchos, as masses of water fell from above. The rain came with the company of a thunderstorm that didn't deter either of them. Being struck by lightning and subsequently crashing to the ground carried the possibility of death. But stopping their journey, losing the initiative to the LNO, and consequently allowing the balance of light and darkness to be broken, was certain death in the long run. Therefore, they stoically kept flying. All of a sudden, a thunderous voice, even louder than the lightning's explosions themselves, entered Tim's ears. *"Be weary thee, be weary thee, who none mage is he. Those who seek sojourn in chamber old as time, must first call spellcraft part of thine."* Nervously, Tim threw startled glances at his surroundings, urgently wondering if he was the only one who heard it. To his fortune, the two of them finally crossed the Alps and approached the Mediterranean Sea. Time to end the pressing radio silence. Sharon's voice was nearly absent of an accent as she delivered the first message, which meant there wasn't anything that had shocked her. *"Glad that bloody rain finally came to an end. Looks like with our speed of roughly 222 miles per hour, which is about 357 kilometres per hour for you, we'll be reaching Mit Rahina in six hours or so." "Splendid, seems like we do good progress,"* Tim answered.

The following hours were left untouched by the rain and thunderstorm's interference. To the left of their route, the Balkan coastline of the Adriatic Sea accompanied them as an ever-present backdrop. Albeit partly mountainous and rocky, it offered perfect opportunities for intermediate breaks, one of which was held near the Croatian–Montenegrin border. Landing their Sleipnir eights was anything but a difficult task for Tim and Sharon, as the two had grown accustomed to their vehicles. A profound urge to catch some sleep became increasingly prevalent, but they wanted to reach Egypt at all costs. A few

glasses of coffee sufficed as an acceptable countermeasure. Dried grass, rocks, and an abundance of bushes perched on a slope allowed for more than enough cover and an unforgettable view of the sea.

Tim ventured forward to address the cryptic message that had reached him during the flight. He did his best to retell the array of ancient words in the correct order. Sharon's facial expression hinted at focus and mental processing. Eventually, she drew her conclusion. Her hazel eyes flickered with an intensity not yet witnessed by Tim. She placed her cup of coffee upon one of the ample stones that, contrary to many others, possessed a useful flat surface. *"Be weary thee indeed.."* she began, sounding both enraged and discouraged. *"It clearly means that a non-wizard can't enter the place where the pillar of light is located. Which, in the best case, means I have to enter this universe all on my own. In the worst case, we might not even find it in the first place."* Tim's attention darted to the tranquil Adriatic Sea, where a ship made its way south-eastwards, the direction they'd soon need to continue their journey in. "*I wouldn't be so pessimistic here,"* he took the liberty to disagree with Sharon. *"Remember what Theo said. Magical abilities can be transmitted by another person, especially during life-changing circumstances. As much as one could dismiss it all as mere theory, we still saw it with our own eyes, back when my home got destroyed and I iced that damn spaceship with a charm."* Sharon neither had a clear counterargument at her disposal, nor wanted to find one, since hope burgeoned with his conclusion. *"You're right, I can't really argue with that. Besides, who knows what such a cryptic message really means? The only thing we can do is stay optimistic and proceed."* Once more reassured, the nightly journey continued.

#

Early in the morning, avoiding a direct crossing over the metropolises of Cairo and Alexandria with their air scooters, they finally reached their destination. Mit Rahina, once known as Memphis, had been a religious and political capital of the Egyptian Empire's Old Dynasty. At the time of Tim Meyer and Sharon Waterfield's endeavour, it was inhabited by around twice as many citizens as Kühltal could muster. Nevertheless, it was still considered a small town, far from the ancient grandeur it once possessed.

Situated on the western bank of the River Nile, it provided not only fertile ground, nourished by that eternal river, but also a vast array of openly displayed artefacts. Aside from those, one could find multiple cafés, restaurants, mosques and a supermarket.

As soon as Sharon spotted an oasis that was not cut in half by any street or line of houses, located east of a cemetery, she knew this might be the best place to land and hide their Sleipnir air scooters. Tim wholeheartedly agreed, and they soon found themselves standing amidst the palm trees. Fortune was again on their side. They had worried about being noticed while approaching the North African small town, but they quickly found even this had been accounted for in the design. A thin layer of invisibility potion steamed over the surface and allowed them to land with all the necessary secrecy. *"Even the more irrigated areas of this region seem so dry and hot. What a stove this desert is,"* Sharon commented, clearly not used to such weather aside from yearly vacations. *"To us, Sharon, to us..."* Tim Meyer replied, enthralled by his new surroundings. *"For the people of this land, it was apparently sufficient enough to build a civilisation upon."* Quickly, he stopped speaking. The names Narmer, King Menes resonated within his mind. Beldon had told him to follow his intuition, and the old tome he had recited had clearly mentioned this location. It had to be near. Beneath each grain of sand, a portal to the pillar of light possibly lingered, a relic the good-willed amongst magicians aimed to protect, and their bad counterparts dared to destroy. *"King Menes..."* Tim repeated in a voice heavy with uncontainable inertia, stumbling as he attempted to dismount his scooter. He uttered the cryptic words, *"We must be so close, so close."*

With all his remaining willpower, he stopped himself from crashing into the grass and instead lay down softly, falling asleep without effort. What Sharon couldn't have known was that the night before his parents' funeral, spent inside Forstquelle's exquisite hotel, had also been a restless one. This night journey to Egypt had been the final straw, causing him to fully succumb to his exhaustion. *"Poor boy*," Sharon

whispered quietly, careful not to disturb his well-deserved rest. She understood clearly that while their motivation was at a high level, their bodies still had their human limits. The equally out-of-breath Sharon decided to rest as well, but, wary of the New Lancers' far-reaching hand, she took some preventive safety measures. Armed with her Japanese maple wand, she drew a wide circle around them, placing at its top centre the runes for higher forces, intuition, and the ancient flow of energies. Inverted, only the ones for necessity, gift, protection, and area were missing. Once commenced, Tim and Sharon could rest securely within the protection charm's safety.

#

Physically liberated from any sign of sleep deprivation, yet for some unexplained reason blindfolded, Tim Meyer found himself in a dreamscape reminiscent of Mit Rahina, though far less frequented than the bustling desert town. He stood amidst a green field, without being able to see it, a collection of ruins scattered idly around it. It felt bewildering. Even without sight at his disposal, he was able to sense the historical gravity of this place. The thudding steps of an approaching tall bull dragged his attention away from the eternal silence. Eager to finally analyse the situation at hand, he reached out to remove the piece of fabric from his eyes, yet the knot would not undo. *"Don't panic, Tim, it's me. The blindfolding's a simple necessity for you to finally become a proper wizards."* Tim instantly recognised the identity behind those reassuring words. It must have been no other than Audun. Though far more conclusive was the meaning behind them, as it perfectly linked with the message delivered during the daunting thunderstorm. *"Well, Audun, the world is small…"* His level-headed reply was laced with a burgeoning unwinding of the tension he had carried before. *"So here I am, trusting and ready."*

"That is precisely the attitude we need, though what's also required is some prowess in meditation. Sure you're up for the task?" Tim didn't simply agree for the sake of continuing, without thoroughly evaluating his abilities. He took a deep breath and pre-emptively cleared his mind of anything that might divert his attention. *"I'm ready, let's do this."* Now his senses asserted dominance and conjured multiple illusionary sensations. First, he felt the heat of a large fire in close proximity, followed by the distinct sensation of swimming in a cold lake. Then a strong wind conveyed the might that air can

possess, soon to be relieved by the solid presence of ground one feels after jumping from an elevated position. In a matter of seconds, his blindfold evaporated to reveal Audun in his bull guise, which prompted Tim's surprise.

"Now you're fit to enter the portal alongside your witch. The key, Meyer, lies beneath these ruins. You must find one stone that has remained in the shape of a perfect cube to this day. Seven half circles, like bowls, are depicted on each side. However, you won't simply lift it and enter a tunnel. That would be too trivial." Tim's curiosity peaked. At that moment, he wanted nothing more than to have this ancient riddle explained. *"How does one enter, though?" "One of you is more spiritual, the other more grounded. The pragmatic one shall tap four times on the stone, the other three. Once this minor ritual is done, a stairwell leading downwards will appear. You should do everything under the cover of darkness, as the entrance will only be visible then."* The answer sounded crystal clear to Tim. He thought of himself as the grounded one, and his companion as the spiritual. *"This place is special," he stated, a glint in his eye. "It feels like a paradox to me. There's an air of eternity here, yet it appears so overlooked."* The bull released a warm breath of steam. *"Once upon a time, it was a revered temple, belonging to a civilisation that richly contributed to human progress. But, as the wheel of time turned, people changed their beliefs and customs. This is why it evokes this feeling of neglected eternity. You're sensitive enough to notice it."* A small smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth. *"Now it makes sense. Thank you very much. See you in Kühltal, I guess?"* Tim asked, curiously raising his eyebrow. "*See you there. But remain cautious, Tim. Adios, amigo."*

Slowly, Tim woke from his slumber, refreshed, with only a negligible hint of exhaustion remaining. A quick glance at the sleeping beauty beside him revealed that Sharon was still dwelling in the realm of dreams. Hesitant to cause a rough awakening, he gently pressed his index finger against her shoulder to draw her attention. After a few stretches and a relaxed yawn, Sharon looked at him with an unburdened expression. *"That rest was badly needed. Now I'm somewhat refreshed. What is it you're so eager to tell me?"* All Tim had to do was recount the revelation he had received. Painting a vivid picture

with his words, Sharon understood the overarching concepts and agreed to search the ruined field. There was a site similar to the one he saw in his dream, and with Mit Rahina not being overly large, finding it was made easier. An almost maddening rush of relief cascaded down her spine, knowing that with Tim as a wizard, entering the magical portal now became possible. However, it was still too bright for them to enter the underground, so they had no option but to wait. A typical North African coffee stand nearby seemed all too inviting.

#

Tim and Sharon stepped in and ordered some refreshments. Fortunately, the staff were familiar with the English language, a necessity for communicating with tourists. Even the television programme, constantly running in the background, was in English. A presenter with slick black hair reported on the outbreak of an unsettling civil war. *"Dear viewers, I may struggle to remain fully composed as I deliver this news to you and I ask for your understanding. A conflict has broken out in Europe between a supposed extra-terrestrial empire, supported by entire army groups conspiring with them. The Lancers of the New Order, or LNO, advocate for humankind's liberation, which has earned them support from various political and military institutions. On the other side, we have secret societies claiming that the LNO is nothing more than a power-hungry organisation falsely presenting itself as a benevolent liberator. Countless footage confirms that magic is being effectively used in combination with conventional warfare. This is an event almost beyond comprehension for our society. We are obliged to advise you to remain cautious."*

Chapter seventeen – Ineffable Underground

The fatalistic news report drew Tim and Sharon's attention right back to their mission. A sudden urge to act made waiting for dawn an almost unbearable ordeal. Each moment passed by with the pressing weight of responsibility tormenting them. There was no room for mistakes, everything had to run

according to plan, which is why the adventurous duo decided to find the right stone before darkness prevailed and visibility decreased. Avoiding the appearance of being too invested, Tim and Sharon strutted through the ruined field where a temple had once stood. *"It must have the exact shape of a cube, with seven half-circles chiselled into it,*" Tim reiterated in a low voice. Sharon tilted her head towards one block, which stood out with its perfect form. *"Look at this one right next to these puddles. It's got some hieroglyphs. Let's approach it very casually."* In their disguise as unburdened tourists, Tim and Sharon cast an observant glance at this piece of history. *"No doubt, everything matches the description*," Tim confirmed with a knowing look. Everything seemed so close, yet ungraspable. He was yearning to finally reclaim the life he had once lived, and so he suggested a daring change of course to cut things short.

"Shall we just go in now?" Sharon was startled by his lack of patience and shook her head in clear disagreement. *"I also want to get it done, but let's not risk it. We need to wait for nightfall. We must remember that the civil war and a possible constant eclipse are two separate tragedies. The protection charm will be cast, but even if we do it early, it won't spare anyone from losing their life in this conflict. Therefore, we must do our best to save what we can."* Tim silently shifted his gaze onto the lingering entrance. *"You have a point there. We're simply not in a position to gamble. Sorry for losing my cool, it's just all too much."* During these moments, Sharon felt deeply grateful for Tim's ability to regain his composure so swiftly. His return to calm impressed her.

The following hours felt painfully long. A skittish stomach ache tormented Tim, who hated this seemingly endless stretch of waiting. Oftentimes, he held a condescending opinion of himself, viewing himself as such a boring character and overlooking everything good he had to offer. Eventually, the long-awaited relief arrived in the form of a scenic sunset. This majestic procession cloaked the Egyptian landscape in a fateful dark mist. Sharon was not burdened by a stomach ache, but she was far more weighed down by the monolithic role she was about to play. A regular individual steadily transforming

into a true hero was a concept she believed only fitting for comic book characters or tales once told by elders. Yet now she, the one most would perceive merely as a pretty face with some skill in computer science, was meant to save the planet from destruction. The more she thought about it, the more its significance began to feel uncomfortable and awkward. Apparently, being a heroine was not about the grandeur and acclaim people dreamed of, but the harsh fate of being the one who bears the unbearable.

Within Tim's mind, an entirely different thought process unfolded. The circumstance of being an ardent admirer of both the witch by his side and the breathtaking scenery made the moment deeply heartrending. It was exactly the right motivational spark to crumble the walls of his comfort zone. Like a warrior launching himself into the heat of battle to challenge fate, Tim decided to confront his worst enemy, his fear of rejection. His heart throbbed, and the pulse within his veins felt omnipresent. "**Sharon…"** he began deliberately, in the deepest voice he could muster. His eyes flickered with admiration. "*This entire thing we went through came unexpected and unwanted, but it changed a whole lot. We dearly wish to regain our normal lives, but that doesn't necessarily mean we have to part. At least I don't want us to. You're one of the most…"* Sharon felt deeply moved to be the object of such desire. It clearly struck a chord inside her, one that made her heart flutter. She knew exactly that whatever Tim was about to say would be most flattering. With gentleness and feminine grace, she placed her index finger upon his lips to seal them. Their eyes never left each other's. *"I'm aware of what's inside you. Girls have a sense for that."* Cryptically refusing to elaborate, she moved closer for an ardent kiss, more expressive than any answer could ever be.

What both were obliged to continue with was fulfilling the actual prophecy. *"Before we start, I'd like to share something with you, Tim,"* she said in a low voice. *"As a little girl, I always wondered about some quirks my father had. He was quite handy with crafting and repairs, so you'd often catch him with tools in his hands. Yet sometimes, he struggled with more challenging tasks. Once, I caught him pointing a screwdriver at a broken car's coupling. He muttered something I had to write down so I wouldn't forget*

it. 'Till air ais gu do chruth tusail.' The coupling he worked on rumbled a bit, and shortly after, he returned to me and my mother, Ainsley, and triumphantly proclaimed it fixed. Now I understand that he most probably used a charm." A soft chuckle escaped from Tim's throat. *"It's always these ancient languages, isn't it? I assume that, just as in Martin's family, magic runs through yours. One day you should give your father a proper demonstration of your own skill in spellwork."*

#

After that personal titbit was shared, Tim and Sharon conspiratorially made their way through the Oasis settlement under the night sky. The stars sparkled brightly above them as they reached the unassuming block. Tim followed Audun's instructions to the letter, yet the entrance remained locked. Frustration etched itself deeply into Tim's and Sharon's expressions as everything they tried continued to fail. Sharon tapped before Tim, testing the act of tapping itself with both faster and slower rhythms, yet it remained fruitless. The stubborn Egyptian block tested the young couple's resilience like never before. Tim's anger reached a point where he had to close his eyes for a moment to catch his breath, a display of emotion Sharon wasn't yet accustomed to. Equally annoyed, Sharon suggested one last desperate attempt. *"Look, my dear, there's one last thing we haven't tried. How about you tap three times, and I'll tap four?"* Tim's mind was blown by her unintentionally insightful suggestion. Aside from all the spellwork and enchantment, he was the more spiritual soul of the two. *"That's bloody brilliant. I can't believe I've been so naive. After all, it's been me receiving all these prophetic dreams and messages from spirits. It simply has to work."*

Feeling renewed hope, Tim tapped his hand on the block three times, while Sharon did four. The entrance that rose from the ground surpassed anything the two expected. Framed by an arch richly adorned with ember elements and jewels, a golden staircase led downwards into a bright white dust. A layer of fluffy clouds obscured the view into this encapsulated realm, but once they passed through, the scenery beyond it revealed itself as a reflection of ancient Memphis. Tim and Sharon weren't overly concerned by the numerous steps they had to take, as the sight of the ancient Egyptian city inspired

nothing but awe and wonder. Rows of houses and small businesses led towards an enormous temple complex, with palm trees standing beside imposing obelisks. Men were dressed in loincloths, women in thin robes, each adorned with some form of ancient accessory. It was an image of how ancient Egypt would have looked like if every of its citizen was well off. *"This blows everything out of proportion,"* Tim Meyer proclaimed in utter astonishment.

Sharon had already opened her mouth, ready to express her emotions, when two ravens landed in front of them and shape-shifted back into human form. Their hair was black, short, and curly. *"Greetings, fellow magicians. Forgive our forwardness, yet given that we haven't seen new faces in a few thousand years, I assume you've come with certain intentions."* Sharon Waterfield nodded kindly and explained the purpose of their presence. *"My name is Sharon Waterfield, and this gentleman beside me is Tim Meyer. We're part of an organisation called the Task Force Fir, founded and associated with the order of the 'Four Magi,' formerly known as 'the Seidrist Thing.' If you're familiar with the evil giant Munrir and his plan, you might know what our visit concerns. I'm here to cast a protective circle around the pillar of light, as prophesised to do so."* The two shape-shifters gazed at each other, wondering at the context. "*Perhaps you should speak with the two guardians of the sun and moon columns, two half-brothers named Brian and Hayden. You'll find them and the pillar within that great temple perched on the central hill."* Confident with being one step closer to accomplish their mission, Tim and Sharon bade farewell two these two helpful wardens.

It became increasingly evident that this realm was inhabited solely by magicians, yet their method of practising spellwork set them apart from others. Without the aid of a wand, they simply crossed their arms and closed their eyes. Wordlessly, likely through the sheer power of their minds, they achieved the desired results. One older woman, for example, summoned a tiny raincloud over her vegetable garden to irrigate it. Eventually, Sharon and Tim reached the gigantic temple, constructed from monolithic blocks

of sandstone and marble. Just as the mighty ash stood enthroned within the centre of Beldon's library, so did the temple tower over every other construction.

#

As they stepped inside, each footfall echoed through the reverent halls. There they stood, facing the two legendary pillars known only from stories and ancient tomes. On the left, the moon pillar shimmered in darkness, perfectly blended with an enchanting silver moonlight, as a crescent above it radiated a soft glow. To the right, the famous pillar of light vibrantly illuminated the room, with a likeness of the sun hovering above it nonchalantly. Seated on a throne, a pale man with long white hair guarded the moon pillar. The other pillar was protected by a man who looked related to him, yet possessed a very long, braided beard. This time, it was Tim's turn to speak. One could detect a hint of nervousness in his voice, as he needed to convince the two to allow the protective charm to be cast. *"You two must be the wardens of the pillars, Brian and Hayden, right? I'm called Tim Meyer, and this wonderful sorceress goes by the name Sharon Waterfield. She is prophesied to place a protective circle around the pillar of light, which is necessary to shield it from the New Order Lancers' harmful intentions."* The man with the long white hair directed a suspicious gaze at the duo, his deep voice carrying a defensive tone. "*My name is Hayden. I was entrusted with guarding these relics alongside my half-brother Brian for millennia. We know of Munrir's malicious plans. However, we can't simply allow you to meddle with the pillars, as there is no such prophecy."*

Hayden's initial dismissal conjured a moment of powerlessness for Tim and Sharon, one that became more evident on their faces with each passing moment. He continued with sound arguments to emphasise his reasoning. "*You two could very well be part of the Lancers fellowship, seeking to harm the sunlight under the guise of protecting it."* He leaned forward, ready to react to any movement. The bearded brother played some soothing chords on his golden harp and released an exhausted sigh. *"Brother, these are the two our father told us about. Remember the German lad and the Scottish lass?*

Just look at them, they fit his description precisely. Remember the grangerised water flask?" Sharon swiftly retrieved the water flask from her backpack. Brian gestured towards it. A wave of recognition swept through Hayden's mind, and he marked himself with a facepalm. *"How could I forget that? I must apologise to you. This must have happened because my brother keeps distracting me with his endless poetry.*" With mild annoyance, Hayden raised his eyebrows. *"He's either playing his harp or expressing himself in rhymes. Good ones, but at some point it becomes nerve-racking."*

Brian adjusted a few strings on his instrument and began to play. *"Rejoice, rejoice, these two arrived, their journey brave and fair. For goodwill's sake, may legends strive, Let kinsmen feast and raise their glass, for festive is the air."* Tim Meyer and Sharon Waterfield were touched by the spontaneous skaldic improvisation and clapped their hands. "*We feel honoured,"* Sharon remarked, "*not only by your cooperation but also to have finally jumped through all these hoops. This has been an insane journey, perhaps the hardest task of our lives so far, but nevertheless we made it."* Giddy, she raised one leg and wrapped her arms around Tim's neck. Shedding a single tear, Tim began to reflect, his thoughts drifting through the last few weeks. From floating tropical cities bursting with neon light, to time-travelling into the Victorian era, to visiting enchanted libraries, he was only just beginning to realise the magnitude of the adventures they had undergone. Stirred by the wave of emotion, he embraced his admired witch Sharon, more than satisfied that at least the final step seemed to be unfolding without nefarious interference. Until a strong root, reaching into the chamber like a tendril, interrupted his train of thought.

Everything could have turned out perfectly, the pillar of light shielded and Munrir's plan thwarted, were it not for a pivotal mistake stemming from Tim's superficial attitude. Audun had informed him how to open the magical entrance, though Tim had forgotten to ask how to close it again. This proved to have serious consequences, as the open gateway to the surface unfortunately attracted unwelcome attention , the very worst they could have wished for. One of the LNO's spaceships landed close to Tim and Sharon's air scooters. A mystic steam escaped from the futuristic UFO as the exit hatch lowered.

Deadly Nightshade, Monkhood, Raintree, Angel's Trumpet, and even their High Staffwielder, Karl Surt, dismounted the vehicle. They too arrived fully equipped with combat gear, as, just like the TFF, everything had to go according to plan.

A local dressed in regional attire, though marked by a brightly shining talisman around his neck, approached the delegation. He belonged to one of the many sister organisations the LNO had established around the globe. In the Arabic-speaking world, it was the so-called 'Jaish ul Saharin' that extended the new lancers' reach even further. He greeted the five with their characteristic forearm handshake. Being the highest-ranking authority present, Karl led the briefing in his German accent and addressed the local mage. *"Kabir ibn Tariq, it seems your aerial observations have finally paid off, aside from your divination, of course."* Kabir shook his head slightly in disagreement. He was fluent in English, though his Arabian accent remained distinct. *"Do not underestimate our reading of the stars and coffee grounds. Our brave lions observed this area fruitlessly for years. It was divination that led us to believe the legendary pillar of light was here. The stars told us today would be significant, a rather cryptic revelation. I felt we should reinforce the local guards, and voilà, one spotted the open entrance." "Does that mean they left it completely unguarded?"* Brother Angel's Trumpet asked curiously. Kabir simply nodded. Nightshade formed a wicked smile. *"It's fascinating how two people can be so refined in knowledge gathering while being so dim-witted when it comes to safety measures. Good for us, tragic for them."* Sister Monkhood, though, suddenly felt a rush of burden, almost as if reluctant to fulfil their task. Raintree, eager to contribute to their success, tilted his head towards the two air scooters.

"The Task Force Fir seemingly possesses at least some ingenuity. Why not make it even more tragic for these dim-witted amateurs by beating them with their own equipment?" Kabir responded to his suggestion with a tap on the shoulder. *"Interesting approach. They might even fit through the entrance. A bit more speed may come in handy, as we're still completely unaware of who or what guards the pillar. Speed would give us an edge."* Karl Surt walked in contemplative circles, his bald forehead creased with

concerned wrinkles, until a plan began to take shape. *"Nightshade and Monkhood will focus on one, Raintree and Angel's Trumpet on the other aspect. The girls will simultaneously cast the 'Bliksmeduz' charm on whoever is there, while the lads use 'Brustiz ja Skakaniz' to ram the pillar of light. I need you to summon all your magical energies to get the job done. No risk-taking, no self-initiative, just a swift sweep and out."* It didn't take long for the four to master Tim and Sharon's Sleipnir Eights, as these machines were specifically designed for ease of use. Meanwhile, the Jaish ul Saharin guarded the entrance tirelessly. The small LNO contingent made their final preparations before entering, adjusting their gear and drawing their wands like cavalrymen before a charge. At the very last second, Sister Nightshade discovered a button marked with the symbol of smoke and the letters I, V and P, leading to only one assumption. *"People, these things have an invisibility potion outlet. Let's use everything these silly-minded amateurs have put into our hands."* Raintree, Angel's Trumpet and, still reluctantly in performance, Monkhood clapped in genuine admiration and cheered her on.

#

Now it was time to descend into the inner earth and finally complete the mission. They did so in full invisibility, moving slowly enough to avoid making any sound. Wordlessly, they spotted the gigantic temple, struck in awe just as Tim and Sharon had been. The absence of any notable structure like a pillar nearby led them to the reasonable assumption that it was most likely located within the temple complex. Now, hovering inside the reverent building, they spotted Tim Meyer and Sharon Waterfield cheering to Brian's improvised ballad.

Unbeknownst to the looming danger behind them, Sharon optimistically drew her wand. *"Now, let's seal the deal by casting that protective circle." "Yes, now is the moment. Let's end this hazardous journey."* Tim was just about to confirm when an unfamiliar voice from the background interrupted him. *"Indeed it is."* Before they could even turn around, a shockwave followed by a deafening bang hurled them to the ground, and another blast followed soon after. The young witch Sharon found herself

immobilised on the marble floor. As the dust settled, she stood up, only to her shock, to see herself lying there. Turning towards the direction the attack had come from, she saw a crashed Sleipnir Eight with two dead wizards lying beside it. Brian and Hayden exited the temple, scanning the area for any potential enemy reinforcements. Right next to him, the pillar of light that Sharon had been tasked with protecting had become Tim's grave. It had broken in half, its upper end burying her beloved companion. An ocean of painful emotions threatened to drown her and, as further torment, in Sharon's current state she was simply unable to cry. Her heart and soul felt crushed. Every step that had seemed to bring them closer to the goal had been in vain.

One undoubtedly comforting hand cupped her shoulder, it was none other than the bright, mystical Lady Vanadis. Unlike with Tim, she sounded less light-hearted, far more understanding of what Sharon was going through. *"Don't look at it, Sharon Waterfield, for all you will see is solely pain and misery."* The young Scot, barely able to vocalise, mustered all that remained within to respond. *"I guess that's it now, dead by twenty and my world left in cold darkness and a sinister global civil war."* *"No, it's not!"* Vanadis stated assertively, her voice echoing against the ancient walls. "*The prophecy must be fulfilled, even if it demands that you and Tim alter reality, regardless of whether we have to gamble with time and space!"* Her words were met with initial disbelief, until Sharon remembered that every single thing Vanadis had told Tim had shortly after come to pass. Overwhelmed by lethargy, Sharon fell into a trance.

Chapter eighteen – Destiny's Loopholes

Harmonious fields of lush green, bending under the gentle force of a soothing wind, welcomed Sharon. Bodies of crystal-clear water shimmered in a serene light blue. She found herself in the fen landscape that had once introduced Tim to his calling. She felt the very same emotions he had felt. The

realm held an atmosphere that united all positive emotions, yet without overwhelming the observer. Instead, this unique ambience gently caressed one's soul. The humongous grey cat, Biggy, entered the scene with a roaring "*meow*." Sharon was still shaken by what she had seen, although the fantastical creature was enough to redirect her thoughts. She looked into the large animal's eye and proclaimed in bewilderment, *"A British Shorthair, the size of a car."*

"That's correct, Sharon. Funnily enough, Tim dropped the exact same size comparison. But without the breed specification." All of a sudden, Vanadis stood behind her, the necklace adorning her chest emphasising the benevolent authority she radiated. Although just the mention of her companion, whom she had initially felt so indifferent towards, now filled her eyes with tears, she held them back with fortitude. Another large cat, this one with unusual blue fur, came to comfort her. Clearly, none of this escaped Vanadis's observation. *"You poor little thing,"* she murmured. *"You two were supposed to get along well, but no one expected you to forge such a strong bond."* With one hand, she stroked the blue cat's fur and, with the other, ran her fingers through Sharon's hair. *"Love holds a lot of energy. That is why it sometimes feels almost awkward, which is why we constantly question it."* Sharon did her best to regain her composure. *"I'm not quite sure how it works, but somehow his constant presence influenced me. At the start I was very much averse to this entire magic, spellstuff sort of life. But now it feels strangely like home." "It's called life, my dear. We encounter people, experience things, and some of those incontrovertibly change us. This blue one is called Terry, by the way, and the grey one is Biggy."* Vanadis took a seat next to her.

"So, what made you change your mind about him? What is it that draws you so much to Tim? Let's talk, woman to woman," the mystic Lady inquired curiously. Sharon started to reminisce about her companion. From the first flicker of memory onwards, one of Tim's favourite rap instrumentals melodically followed her train of thought. *"There were boyfriends before him. Let's say I've had my fair share of cheating and sorrow. The usual bad luck in love phase, where one drama follows another."* At ease because of her serene surroundings, Sharon freely expressed herself. *"See, people tend to talk about*

'the one for you' far too often, but Tim and I really do complete each other. His down-to-earthness and my sass clash so strongly that it forms a balance. My life could have been so much more relaxed if I'd had that earlier. He's also…" Sharon paused, almost as if reluctantly revealing her opinion. *"Also…?"* Vanadis repeated, raising an eyebrow. "*Yeah, I find him somewhat attractive…"* Vanadis acknowledged it with a light nod, refraining from intruding further.

Mournfully, Sharon closed her eyes, part of her still embarrassed, and asked Vanadis a question that would either shatter or reinforce her hopes. *"Did I really manage to lose that person, aside from daylight and humanity's future?"* The mysterious Vanadis leaned against an elderberry tree, contemplative. *"What a disheartening experience to live through. Going through life with a truly special person lost, while a never-ending eclipse cloaks you in darkness and cold."* She stopped, allowing a heavy veil of silence to linger. *"The world doesn't need to be such a dark place."* The soft smile on her face appeared reassuring, as did her hands resting on Sharon's shoulders. *"Nevertheless, in order to rearrange things, I'm afraid you'll have to figure out a process all other magicians have failed at. What I'm talking about is deliberate time travelling. Not the kind you'd use if stranded in an era you don't belong in, trying to get back, but one that allows you to enter any desired moment in the past. Never the less, first you need to find and neutralise the snitch. Otherwise, he'll disrupt this endeavour all the same. This time, there is absolutely no room for failure. The only hint I can provide is to find a certain relic and take it to the mighty ashes. Follow one of its roots until a well comes into sight. That is all I can help you with."*

#

Sharon opened her eyes again, leaving the tranquil dreamscape. In exchange, her head felt heavy, but she soldiered on. For a moment, she contemplated Vanadis's words. Was all the painstaking research they had done to find the pillar of light once more necessary to locate another elusive relic? Sharon saw herself standing before yet another monolithic mission, with all its risks and challenges. After releasing an

exhausted sigh, she turned towards Tim, buried beneath the pillar of light. Reaching out, she tenderly traced over his lifeless hand. *"I'll set things right, don't worry. Just like my dad with the coupling…"* Her voice faded as an idea sparked in her mind. *"…Just like the coupling."* With an overconfident smirk, she directed her gaze towards the broken pillar. *"Mmm, what exactly did he mumble back in the day?"* A pensive frown betrayed her mental effort to recall. *"Ah, now I remember."* With the wand pointed at the mythical structure, she cast, "Till air ais gu do chruth tusail." Though against all hope, nothing happened, her power was not mighty enough to repair it. *"Boggin thing!"* she scolded the broken pillar. Yet, from the corner of her eye, she spotted a Sleipnir Eight, lying there, mildly damaged. Confident in her memory, she aimed the Japanese maple wand at the stranded Sleipnir Eight. *"Till air ais gu do chruth tusail."*

The futuristic vehicle quickly reassembled into its original shape. Martin Fink had once recommended that the best way to release tension was a short meditation, so she did just that. For five minutes, a state of pure neutrality prevailed in her mind and body. It worked wonders, exhaustion and stress faded, along with the anger at her inability to fix the pillar alone. Sharon stood up and tightened her clothing. Brother Raintree, who lay next to the scooter, was not a familiar sight to her, only a defeated enemy. Yet his tactical vest struck her as useful, which influenced her decision to wear it herself. Sharon already held the spell book in her hand, ready to search for a charm to adjust it to her size, until she realised that a system of buckles and locks allowed for that without any magic. More than ever before, she felt ready for the task, both physically and mentally. Hayden and Brian returned to the temple, beaming at the young witch with a merriment born of surprise. They hadn't exactly expected her to survive.

"Forsaken was hope to the earthborn till a bearer of hope has arisen," Brian proclaimed enthusiastically at the sight of an unharmed Sharon. Although Hayden didn't seem to share this sentiment in the slightest, his facial expression displayed a tangible hint of nihilism. *"As much as I'd like to cheer with you, brother, I struggle to see budding hope here. Of course it's a blessing that she survived, that's inarguably luck amidst all misfortune. However, the pillar of light is broken. Even with the moon pillar*

still fully capable of granting a steady flow of seasons and a regular proceeding of day and night, sunlight is now too frail to supply sufficient warmth. Maybe not today, probably not tomorrow, but the ecosystem will eventually meet its collapse." Sharon's gaze, though, betrayed her to be far from hopeless. *"It doesn't need to be this way. I can still set things straight."* Hayden could not help but scornfully chuckle at her self-assured retort. He rolled his eyes. *"That must be something that even looks unbelievable to us.."* By raising his tone at the end of his statement, he aimed to vocally emphasise the audacity of Sharon's plan, yet she swiftly interrupted with one word. *"Time travelling."*

This also raised Brian's suspicion. *"Deliberate time travelling is what you're addressing. Still to this day, there's been no magician who managed to pull it off. The only solid traces believed necessary involve offering a particular relic to a wondrous well one finds by following one of the library ash's roots."* Sharon stood wide-eyed upon hearing Brian's corroboration. *"Yes, exactly. I've received the same information whilst being unconscious."* Each of her words was delivered in a breathy and excited timbre. Immaculately synchronised, their gazes shifted towards the enormous root. *"If this one is connected to the library as well, Sharon could follow it upwards…"* Hayden began. *"…and start searching for the well in advance…*" Brian continued. *"…and save us much valuable time,*" Sharon Waterfield concluded. Triumphant yet giddy with anticipation, she boarded the air scooter. "*That might be a direct connection to the ash."* Above her, the strong root led upwards and blurred into the distance, yet her vehicle couldn't rise higher. *"There's no obstacle, but I can't take off!"* she huffed. *"Most probably an energetic one-way road. What a ruddy misfortune we have,"* Brian scoffed in utmost irritation.

"Meaning that this path is no option, bloody bahookie." Sharon frowned, deeply frustrated. *"Well, the only available way is the entry I came from."* "Be cautious, Sharon Waterfield, think about the possible danger," Brian warned her, both emphatically and firmly. "*We should ascend as a group, just in case there are still enemies lingering there. Now it's unbelievably vital to keep you safe, more than ever before."* Hayden placed a hand on his half-brother's shoulder. "*That seems more prudent. Let's not lose*

any more time and ensure a safe ascent." Filled with unstoppable determination, the brothers and Sharon retraced her and Tim's path through the spellbinding settlement, which mirrored ancient Memphis. The inhabitants appeared thoroughly confused by the abrupt outbreak of violence, as they had never witnessed any before. Finally, the trio stood just a few steps away from the portal. Hayden and Brian drew two large golden shields slung across their backs and formed a kind of shield wall. Their surfaces were finely polished, to a degree that gave them a radiating shimmer. *"These protect against spells, yet are far too heavy for most people,"* Hayden informed her with pride.

#

As the two set foot on the soil, a contingent of mages from the Jaish ul Saharin greeted them with a bombardment of charms, ranging from lightning to sandstorms and levitated boulders. The two managed to withstand each wave of malicious magic but were unable to progress further. Any observer would have classified the situation at hand as a classic stalemate. *"Those rascals trapped us,"* Brian scoffed angrily. The local militia maintained their offensive efforts for several minutes, yet nothing was strong enough to harm the trio. Sharon Waterfield grew increasingly desperate and miffed, her Scottish accent thickening with every passing moment until her eyes fell upon a horn dangling from Hayden's belt. "*Gallus idea, but worth a try.*" "*Wait, that holds immense power, don't…"* Brian wasn't fast enough to finish his sentence as Sharon blew the horn with all her might. The tone of the archaic instrument possessed a depth that could only be described as foreboding, eerie and authoritative. Its volume was likely tenfold that of a ship's horn, and its roaring was deep enough to make nearby houses vibrate as if enduring an earthquake.

The Jaish ul Saharin ceased their attacks during the horning's duration, horrified by its deafening sound. Unforeseeable for them, as soon as they aimed their wands at the trio, they found themselves unable to cast any spells. What had occurred was that the sound had been powerful enough to disturb the magicians of the Jaish ul Saharin's energy to such an extent that it rendered them incapable of using witchcraft. Utterly dumbfounded by their inability to act, the Arab allies of the New Order's Lancers

threw down their wands and equipment and fled northwards. A huge burden was lifted from Brian, Hayden, and Sharon's shoulders. All the windows that had been shut by the locals were suddenly opened, and the air swiftly filled with Arab ululating, as those citizens were not fond of the dark order's presence in their hometown either. A wave of pride washed through Sharon. For the first time in her adventure, she was gratified for the efforts made and not denied recognition for them due to the need for secrecy.

Hayden turned towards the young witch, the surprise at this unexpectedly positive outcome and even a paper-thin trace of admiration for her daring initiative, visible on his face. *"I think that's what people tend to call a high-risk, high-reward action. Audacious in nature, but sometimes a necessity."* Sharon felt a surge of confidence, her eyes sparkling with dignity. *"I simply saw that horn and assumed that if they carried it with them, there must be something about it."* Meanwhile, Brian quickly went back underground and returned with the air scooter. Due to the unpredicted combat, she had completely forgotten about its existence. Sharon passed a hand over her face in feigned exasperation. *"Of course, how else would I travel back? Thank you lads so much, both of you. I would have been utterly miserable here, facing them without your shields and that horn, of course."* Brian raised his hand with hooded eyes and a smile on his face, gesturing that she needn't thank them. *"As ones on the good side of magical society, you owe us no thanks. We're all in the same boat."* It was around midday, yet the sunlight grew weaker and weaker, an unmistakable reminder of the looming catastrophe. It was time to move on. Hayden and Brian bade farewell to Sharon Waterfield, who, at least for the journey ahead, was left to her own.

On the very same day, she took the trip back on her air scooter, although the route she chose differed slightly. Sharon was aware that staying outside the Lancers' scope would be crucial, so she was keen to choose a different path homewards. Instead of following the eastern side of the Adriatic coastline again, she opted for its Italian counterpart, the western one. Luckily, the LNO's Arab allies had only just become aware of Brian and Hayden's presence at the portal and hadn't realised that she was still very much alive. Sharon roamed across the sky, above a part of Italy that was rather quaint and unobtrusive,

though now and then she encountered sights that reminded her of the ongoing civil war. Not far from her, one of the UFOs was shot down and crashed into the sea with a howling sound, while in the background, some cities battled against raging fires. Near Venice, exhaustion threatened to overwhelm her senses and forced her to land and catch some sleep at a nearby spot. Once more, she shielded her position with the help of a protective circle. The interval between resting and slipping into slumber eased the stress and allowed her to reflect on everything that had happened. Sharon had lost a companion she cared for dearly, and the option of time travel was still an uncertain possibility. Tears ran down her cheeks as the adrenaline began to fade.

#

In her deep slumber, she entered yet another dreamscape. The image of a reverent gothic cathedral, with all its archaic arches and dark wooden elements, unfolded before her. It was once again the familiar setting so often used in the Hollis Gondler series. Unlike how it had appeared in Tim's dream, there was an absence of the mildly wondrous ambience. In its place, it felt as quaint as eighteenth-century Kühltal. However, some elements remained similar to Tim's dream, such as the film production equipment one might recognise at second glance. *"I think the scene in which I die should be omitted,"* Tim's voice quipped playfully, breaking the tranquillity. Sharon instantly recognised it as his and turned around to see Tim standing just the way she had wished: healthy and unburdened. At first, she tried to adopt her usual teasing poise, but swiftly gave in, ran over to Tim, and hugged him more tightly than ever before. Each word Sharon uttered was laced with a timbre both ardent and euphoric. *"I'll omit this bloody scene myself, you'll see."*

Tim leaned slightly back and cocked an eye. *"And you're going to achieve this by doing what exactly?"* With a display of clearly tangible confidence, she informed him about her recent contact with Vanadis. He kept listening, his attention keen on each syllable. "*All I can do is wish you the best, my witch. Although, keep in mind that there's still a snitch amongst us."* The thought that one of his friends might be a traitor in disguise visibly irked him. *"It's mind-boggling that such treacherous folks exist. I*

suppose you're left with no other option than to trick the trickster. There must be a way to set a trap for this individual. Uh, if I were just by your side to come up with something coherent." Sharon involuntarily smirked when she noticed him quickly falling back into the role of strategic planner, almost as though nothing had changed at all. "*I'll find something, Timmy, you'll see."* She promised him, highly reassured. A shout from the distance *"Action!*" startled them for a short moment. *"Sharon, it's really delightful to see you again, but I'd like to try something."* Sharon's unquestionable trust in him made her agree with a light-hearted sigh. Tim grinned boyishly. *"Oh, thank you, my dear."* He paused for a second, said *"wake up"* and snapped his fingers.

#

Sharon instantly woke up, utterly regretful that she inevitably and incontrovertibly had to exchange the quaint dreamscape for the dark reality. The sense in which she perceived it as dark was of a literal nature, since the destruction of the pillar of light had shown its consequences. Sharon was unable to guess the time of day, as the horizon was much darker than usual. Its degree of illumination was just good enough to see. It was comparable to an approaching rainstorm, when the clouds cloak the world below in gloom. With the dimmed light, the temperature had fallen, unmistakably too chilly for summer, especially for Italy. Sharon felt a stark surge of unmatched vigour, a pressing urge to act.

A nearby small river was nestled between two opposing lines of pine trees, an all-too-alluring source of revitalisation. Sharon had always been a very hygienic person; the inability to clean herself since their journey's start had deeply irritated her. One might say her subconscious mind probably played its part when she decided to land nearby the tiny river.

Stepping into the water felt like a long-sought relief. Finally able to wash herself, albeit in a river, not only invigorated her body but also her mind. A wicked grin carved itself onto the Scottish witch's lips as a plan took shape in her mind. The best way to catch the snitch was to deceive him. Now, the acting class she had once taken appeared to be invaluable. Only Brian, Hayden, and herself knew she was still alive and capable. As far as the LNO were concerned, she had almost certainly been written off as a

threat. This was what she had to turn to her advantage. At last, Sharon figured it all out. She would go by the name Emily Walton, something the creative part of her brain had spontaneously conjured. This would require a thorough makeover, as well as obtaining new documents. The magical community as a whole possessed far-reaching resources, meaning that if she played her cards right, then all would be possible.

Cautiously scouting the area, Sharon fairly quickly discovered a battered small town. Over its town hall, a flag was planted, luckily not the new Lancers' emblem with their pickaxe, wand, and broom, but an Italian one. Closely adjacent to it, another flag danced proudly in the wind, depicting the easily recognisable Venetian lion raising a paw, underlined by the words Testardi Branditori di Bacchette. Assuming it to be a local order, she closed in circumspectly. Graves had been dug for the fallen, and in the main square, some of the characteristic LNO flags were being publicly burned. A group of locals reacted suspiciously as the unfamiliar young woman from Scotland entered the hair salon and requested to dye her hair a black tone. Changing hair colour usually isn't a far-fetched request, yet in the midst of a civil war, it seemed a rather questionable priority. Sharon's perspicacity hadn't abandoned her. She simply explained that she belonged to an order that had been almost exterminated by the LNO, which was why she needed to change her persona to avoid their persecution. With the change of hair colour, the character of Emily Walton was born.

Chapter nineteen – A Witches Cottage

Sharon's makeover paved the way for her return to Kühltal, although there were still some aspects left to be worked out. One of those gaps to be filled was the need for accommodation, another was who to inform about her imminent arrival. So she stood there, near the quaint little waterway framed by a

line of pine trees on each side, walking in circles pensively, a quirk she had unintentionally picked up from Tim. The obscure midday darkness around her made it all feel unreal, as if she were chained within some baffling fever dream. Her mind drew a connection between the baffling circumstances at hand and how equally incomprehensible it must feel for sceptics now to discover that magicians walk among them. This thought, in turn, brought her memory back to Martin and his own far-reaching magical lineage. *"That's it!"* she exhaled in excitement. *"He and Miko are two I can safely trust."* Once this realisation had settled in her mind, she reached out to him using the Broomracer 101 app. Down to each detail, she informed him about the events that had taken place in Mit Rahina.

Martin was relieved to hear that Sharon was still alive and well, but nearly dropped his phone upon learning of their friend Tim Meyer's passing. Fortunately, he had Miko to help him process the grim news. The three of them evaluated the risks and available options, and decided it would be best to form an inner circle, a task force within the task force, so to speak. Their reasoning was simple: each of them had been targeted by the Lancers at one point, which meant none of them could be the snitch. Clandestine silence about their plans was essential. Ironically, the ongoing civil war, for once, turned out to be a helpful factor. Rightfully assuming that the chaos would continue to rage on, the owner of Forstquelle's skiing hut gathered all their belongings and fled to what they believed to be neutral Switzerland. From there, they took a plane to the Caribbean to start a new life. The skiing hut's door stood wide open, a symbol of the owner's willingness to start anew and leave their homeland behind. This remote and abandoned hut presented itself as the perfect base, fitting precisely the trio's needs.

With that out of her way, she was now able to set off for Kühltal's dale. The route would take her through a war-torn Europe. Her trip revealed an ever-repeating pattern, as large settlements often appeared more damaged than small villages. She concluded that seeking a remote place would indeed be a prudent assumption. As Sharon wound her way through the clouds, she gasped in utter surprise as snowflakes kept falling on this second of August. *"Bloody bahookie, now we're facing a second Ice Age!*" she scoffed. Finally, she reached the southern part of the Black Forest when an unpredicted

snowstorm occurred, limiting her view. In hindsight, it was a benevolent saviour in disguise, as dangerously close to her a fighter jet patrolled. The powerful howling of its turbine engine, so near, sent a shockwave of awareness through her. She did what seemed plausible at that moment and took cover next to a cloud, heavy with precipitation. The war bird flew far too close for her liking. She foresaw the danger, but in an unintentional physical disaster: a crash between her scooter and the jet. Though its tail became visible for the flicker of a second and betrayed the detested LNO symbols, this was when she realised how fortuitous she must have been.

#

About an hour later, she finally made it. Sharon took note of the unobtrusive skiing hut below her. Landing nearby, she messaged Miko once more, asking her to confirm their presence within the rustic cottage, which the Japanese witch did. Relieved to meet her friends again, she knocked on the sturdy wooden door. Martin Fink and Sato Miko opened it with a welcoming smile. Miko swiftly recognised Sharon's loss in her facial expression, subtle though it was, and embraced her dearly. *"Good to have you back in one piece, my dear. It's tragic how everything turned out, but we still have opportunity to change it all."* Throwing a surprised glance at an obtrusive lipstick mark on Martin's neck, Sharon couldn't contain a light chuckle. *"Thanks for the encouragement, Miko. Apparently, you've bonded recently."* Martin Fink quickly covered the amorous mark with his hand. *"Oh yes, good company tends to happen when you expect it the least."* Miko nodded, embarrassed, her cheeks rosy. *"We've been testing the hut for comfort, looking at possible things to fix, stuff like that." "Of course,"* Sharon replied with a playful smirk.

Taking a closer look at the hut's interior revealed its nature as a destination aimed at tourism. The traditional décor created a fitting ambience for the wooden structure. Chairs and tables all bore a common resemblance, having been crafted from the same sturdy dark wood. *"Let's use the least amount of light we can, stay under the radar, and remember never to mention my name outside. Sharon Waterfield is officially out of action. Now I'm Emily Walton,"* Sharon instructed with a clarity that left no room for

misunderstanding. Since she had announced this crucial requirement earlier, both were already informed and forgave her commanding tone. They had come to terms with the responsibility placed upon them, one that most people wouldn't dare to shoulder. *"Agreed. We might use the two rooms upstairs, I suppose,"* Martin suggested, receiving nods of agreement from Sharon and Miko.

With the light on the ground floor turned off, the trio ascended to explore the upper floor beneath the sturdy roof. Miko's eyes lingered on the doors leading to the two rooms. Martin, noticing his companion's unusual behaviour, was eager to address it. *"What's wrong with the doors? What is it about them that ensnared your attention?"* The Japanese witch remained silent for a moment, refusing to interrupt her train of thought, before answering. *"Is it possible to enchant entire rooms? I'm thinking of creating hidden entrances here, it could improve secrecy."* Sharon's eyes widened. Not long ago, while browsing through her spell book, she had come across enchantments for objects. *"What a coincidence! I studied enchantments not long ago. Although I didn't read anything specifically about rooms or chambers, I've noticed more and more that magic is a lot like coding. I've studied some computer science and realised that magic and IT both follow a logical pattern, you only need to be trained in it. Why not tweak some charms and add voice control to transform plain walls into doors?"* A shiver of amazement ran down Martin Fink's spine at hearing such an incredible idea. *"That concept is beyond epic. Nothing like this has ever existed before. I suppose we should test it immediately!"* Sharon, caught up in his scientific enthusiasm, drew her reliable maple wand.

"Alright, lads, first we need to start with the usual procedure: forming a magical circle." With her wand, she drew a circle seven times counter-clockwise on the door. The circle Sharon signified with her wand remained visible on the door; the same would apply to the following runes. *"Secondly, the runes for higher force, flow of energies, and primordial forces."* After she confidently wrote that array of mysterious symbols deriving from ancient times, the circle started to glow. "*Now I need to fully focus,"* Sharon announced, before wholeheartedly continuing with her ritual. She attached symbols associated

with possession, need, primordial powers, gift, and man into the shimmering circle. Steadily, she aimed her tool of spellwork at the enchanted door. *"Nu thu dutiz min anabuda."* Now the door's structure began to lose shape and liquefy, resembling a surrealistic artwork more than a piece of furniture. *"Whenever one points a wand at you and utters 'Become a wall,' you become a wall. Whenever one points a wand at you saying 'Become a door,' you become a door."*

The trio waited a few moments until the door manifested back into its original structure. *"Alright, who wants to be the first to try out the enchantment?"* Sharon offered, her voice laced with palpable conviction. Martin couldn't contain his anticipation and stepped forward. His extendable wand of stainless steel pointed at the door. *"You become a wall."* Within the span of five seconds, the door became a wall and stood there, sturdy as if it had always been part of the room. Fink took off his cap, reaching out to shake Sharon Waterfield's hand. *"As someone born into a family with a long line of magicians reaching far into the past, I have to really congratulate you. If there was a difficulty system for witchcraft on a scale of one to ten, you've probably managed something on a difficulty level of eight or nine.*" Even Miko, with her characteristically discriminative and unimpressed nature, couldn't refrain from praising her skills. "*You rule, girl. Combining written magic with a spell and topping it off with a functional voice command is some top-notch performance. A force to be reckoned with."* The vivid acclaim of Sharon's friends reinstalled the thrust within her, which had been lost back in Egypt. Overwhelmed, she lowered her gaze to the floorboards and replied with a stuttered, *"Thank you."*

An unforeseeable threat was on its way, the inner circle's official baptism of fire. The sound of car wheels winding their way through the woodlands on the muddy dirt road grew louder and louder as the trio took advantage of their new secret room. Their unanimously adopted posture of secrecy allowed only one small, dimly lit window to serve as a source of view. *"It's a police car,"* Martin whispered to his team. Miko drew her wand and positioned herself in a way that made her barely visible from the outside. "*We have to be careful. They could either be allies or enemies. Let's wait until they leave the car."*

At that very moment, almost as if they were following the Japanese witch's instruction, two policemen stepped out. Yet instead of their easily recognisable field caps, they wore LNO headgear and armbands. Sharon raised her index finger, signalling her friends to be quiet.

"See, there's light inside, Thiazmann. Ours, theirs, or simply civilians trying to hide? What do you think, could it be a nefarious threat?" The other officer rolled his eyes, gesturing at the car's headlights. *"Have you ever heard of the term reflection? The skiing hut is abandoned, don't you see? Sometimes I wonder how you passed your exams, Grendel."* Visibly frustrated, he turned around. *"That's the moment,"* Martin whispered hastily. "*I'm going to smash the window as you cast the freezing spell. Miko, take the left, Sharon, the right."* With a high-pitched, loud noise, Fink smashed the window and broke the fever-pitch silence. Three seconds later, Sharon and Miko froze the two officers into blocks of ice. They brought them inside, stripped them of all their equipment, and bound each to a chair. When the two awoke, they found themselves immobilised, with two wands and a handgun pointed at them. Sharon began the interrogation. *"Greetings, LNO blokes. You find yourselves disarmed and at our mercy. Now, we have two options."* Purposefully, she let a handful of seconds pass in silence, knowing that the uncertainty of their possible fates would strain both men's resolve. To appear more intimidating and unpredictable, Sharon conjured a wicked grin. *"Number one: you tell us how to find the Lancers' local headquarters and be handed over to your former colleagues. They might arrest you, but you'll live. Number two: you'll be bewitched into traffic signs and serve society in the only way you're apparently capable of."*

A cold shiver ran through Thiazmann's and Grendel's veins. Their former colleagues would undoubtedly punish them for their disloyalty, but Sharon's feigned threat felt even more crushing. Being locked in for a while, harsh as it might sound, was definitely better than being transformed into an unanimated traffic sign, without senses, but possibly with an indefinite yearning to be human once again. Thiazmann and Grendel looked at each other, forging a silent agreement. Sharon's accent betrayed that she hadn't lived in this part of the world for long, so a precise explanation of the headquarters' location

was in order. "*More than a hundred years ago, a hospital and some surrounding buildings were constructed. Initially to treat victims of tuberculosis, later on to help people recover from dusty lung, people working in the mining sector caught that a lot. But I digress. If you drive northwards, you'll need to take a road a couple of yards beyond the town sign. A small street meanders its way upwards into a gap in the valley. There's no way you can miss the complex, it's a gigantic estate shielded by a large wall crowded with warning signs." "Warning signs to keep up the illusion of it being a work in progress,"* Thiazmann added.

"I know exactly what they're talking about," Martin remarked knowingly, casting serious glances at Miko and Sharon. *"This building was abandoned in the nineties, and has since been shrouded in mystery. Eventually, the wall was constructed, and people assumed it had to do with renovation work or deterring vandalism. Apparently, the Lancers are astute when it comes to finding proper hideouts."* Grendel cleared his throat to gain attention. "*I guess we can strike a deal, since we know about a significant weak point in this structure. In exchange, you'd let us go free. Of course, you can keep your wands pointed at us until we've left the scene.*" Miko took a deep breath, processing the offer and searching for acknowledgment in Martin's and Sharon's eyes. *"Okay, but we'll keep your equipment and IDs, just in case it turns out to be a ruse." "No problem…"* Thiazmann answered in a surprisingly relaxed manner. *"Now, since we've basically given away the location of their headquarters, losing our identification would actually be in our best interest."* He collected his thoughts and began to reveal more secrets.

A shadow of dismay darkened his expression, almost as if he himself felt disheartened by the slim prospect of success for the group. *"This seemingly forgotten area is not merely an abandoned building where youngsters break in and use it to spin some urban legends with what they saw. It's a fortress. Sturdy concrete walls are its body, an intricate surveillance network its eyes. The entire perimeter is under their watch, even the airspace above the roof. However, the main operation is situated*

underground, not in the building itself. The only chance of gaining an edge here lies beneath, since I've never heard of any measures against tunnel warfare. Tunnels are often overlooked as a threat, so it could be a significant surprise factor."

Not long after, the trio kept their promise and released their now disarmed hostages. A deluge of ideas and concepts swirled around Sharon, Fink, and Miko's heads. The first step would be to gain a good impression of the area surrounding the hospital. Secondly, as the task might prove a tad too much to handle alone, they needed to find trustworthy allies to aid them in their mission. His burdened sigh betrayed Martin's reluctance to give away some of their secrecy. *"See, as much as the three of us are poised to remain an exclusive inner circle, we're still nowhere near powerful enough to storm an entire base filled with lancers, surprise factor or not. I think we should fetch Theo for our mission. Him, and no one else."* Miko and Sharon found common ground with Martin there, but there was yet more to consider. *"So, we've unanimously agreed that the 'Who' in our plan must be delegated to Theo. But what about the how?"* Sharon rested her shoulder against a shelf, causing a pen to roll down and drop onto the wooden floor. Miko's orbs widened, a generous idea sparkling in a corner of her mind. *"That's it. The most epic plan ever,"* she proclaimed, earning Martin and Sharon's suspicious attention. *"Enlighten us..."* Sharon demanded. *"We construct a bunch of tunnels. They'll have a strongly reinforced until right below of their base, there we keep them intentionally unstable."*

One remote cuckoo outside the hut caught Sharon's and Martin's attention as Miko paused her planning to catch her breath. Although cuckoo calls are often associated with lunacy, Miko's plan struck them as ingenious. *"Together as a team, we'll make the empty space below their feet shake until it collapses. They'll assume it's an earthquake and flee. But keep listening, lads, it gets even better."* Sharon Waterfield and Martin Fink's curiosity was piqued by such a confident declaration. *"We'll beat the LNO with their own weapons. They love surveillance and spies, so why don't we install*

cameras all around the estate to get a clear image of who's part of their order? If you ask me, it's a solid method to catch a certain snitch." Martin and Sharon stood there in awe. Usually, it was people like Tim or even Theo devising plans, but this time it was Miko's moment to shine. *"That's actually le epic, as the French would say,"* Sharon mused. Martin couldn't suppress a nonchalant chuckle. *"Are you sure about that?"* he replied, mimicking a man sticking his head through a hole, referencing a popular meme of those days. Despite their laid-back exchange, it became increasingly clear that this plan held the potential to turn the tide in their favour. To bring their scheme to life, it was necessary to inform and involve Theo, their esteemed High Staffwielder.

#

The meeting point was rusty and mouldy, a place where machines once crafted by human hands were being overtaken by the restless growth of nature. Not quite a junkyard, but more an assembly of old cars once dragged there by a local towing company, only to be forgotten. Unsure of their future, the vehicles stood there like stranded whales within a square of young deciduous trees. The only aspect keeping this era tethered to the road infrastructure was a narrow, unmaintained path. Some of the cars were almost entirely overgrown with vegetation and internally dysfunctional. Theo had shaved off his beard, sharing the same thought as Sharon, that lying low for a while might be a prudent move. As the four discussed their plans amidst the array of abandoned vehicles, the High Staffwielder showed great interest in the endeavour. *"A brilliant plan, but not easy to carry out. We must scout the area and avoid being seen at all costs. Not to mention that digging tunnels takes not only time but also proper expertise."* *"Is there any order up to such demands?"* Martin asked, hopeful of receiving a clear answer.

Theo released a thoughtful hum. Indeed, finding someone proficient enough was anything but an easy task. The trio's plan, regardless of how clever it might have been, relied on his final decision-making. If he happened to pick the wrong ally, then it was his to blame. Therefore, he took a few moments for speculation. Browsing through his memory, he finally found someone. *"The Ghayat al Hakim!"* he exclaimed, snapping his fingers. *"The what al what?"* Sharon repeated, confused. *"The Ghayat al Hakim are an order originating from some nomadic tribesmen who settled somewhere*

between what we know today as Turkey and Syria. A very secretive bunch of folks, they refrain from telling others their personal names, as they believe revealing one's name could weaken their magical abilities." Sharon, Miko, and Martin gazed at Theo with utmost interest. *"Something similar is believed by tribesmen who don't wish to be photographed. Interesting,"* Martin commented. *"But what makes them suitable for us?"*

The High Staffwielder took a seat on the bonnet of an early-nineties Mercedes roadster, which creaked slightly under his weight. *"We have to go far back into the past to shed some light on them. Some couple of hundred years ago."* Theo took a deep breath, casting perceptive looks around the group to ensure no one was listening, especially not any raven. *"During the early Renaissance, the Ottoman Empire discovered this order, finding themselves frustrated by their stubborn, exclusive nature. We must keep in mind that we magicians aren't fully immune to blades, arrows, or bullets. Hence, the Ghayat al Hakim knew it would be wise to strike a deal with the ever-expanding empire. Even though many wars were decided on the battlefield, sieges became increasingly prevalent, often lasting for months. Any slight advantage in siege tactics could determine a nation's fate. The Ghayat al Hakim conferred about methods to aid the empire. Eventually, they figured out that a blend of the ramming and freezing spells could quickly form solid walls of soil, which could easily be destabilised if one wished. This skillset was perfectly suited to siege warfare, as they could swiftly undermine city walls and collapse the tunnels they'd dug. If you ask me, this sounds perfectly suited to our mission.*" The trio could do nothing but nod in cordial agreement.

Chapter Twenty – Cruise ships and Darkness

Amidst war and chaos, Tim's circle of friends grew increasingly worried about his complete disappearance. Martin Fink felt uneasy leaving his friends without any trace or explanation. An elaborate explanation was needed to set things straight, yet therein lay another serviceable component. Martin and

Miko were definitely cutting cards with the devil when they took the sinister decision to announce Sharon's death along with Tim's. If the traitor happened to sit amongst the friends, then he or she would be misled by this false intelligence. The group gathered at Dennis Stamm's newly acquired home, which bordered the woods not far from his parents' inn. Present around a rustic oak table were Miko, Martin, Dennis, Ronald, Miriam, Franziska, Bedirhan, Ekaterina, and Dennis's uncle Fricco. All of them had witnessed the destructive civil war outside; their faces bore the exhaustion of shock and the callous fading of the worldview they once held. Self-evidently, Sharon was notably absent. Martin Fink slowly recounted the recent events in chronological order. The news of Tim's passing darkened their moods further. Sadness and confusion filled the normally cosy room of Dennis's house.

For Dennis, everything felt even more baffling, as there was a part of himself he had never been acquainted with. Apparently, both his father and uncle were magicians, and the existence of witchcraft, something he had so sternly regarded as old tales and superstition, was now a fact set in stone. Dennis gazed at the candle positioned at the centre of the table, trying to process the weight of reality crashing down upon his consciousness. *"Why have neither you nor my father ever told me about this? What made you hide this part of who I am?"* Fricco drew a wand made from the branch of a walnut tree that grew beside the inn he managed and laid it on the table. *"You see, nephew, when your mother escaped the Yugoslavian civil war, she wanted nothing more than stability in her life. Informing one's partner about being a wizard is a delicate business, requiring trust and understanding. Your father being a magician took her some time to come to terms with."*

"He told her about the adversary between us and the New Lancers. As he then elaborated on the possibility of a potential outbreak of violence, she begged him to shield you from any conflict, any potential harm. During your childhood, we noticed that you were handy with tools. Since that already occupied your interest, we saw no reason to expose you to this intricate framework of magical orders with all its alliances and rivalries." Dennis remained silent for some time, taking in the rush of information. Miriam held her boyfriend Ronald's hand, seeking an anchor amidst the uncertainty. *"I feel*

like I'm trapped in a Hollis Gondler movie." An exhausted sigh escaped Ronald. Miriam, being such a big fan of the movie and book series, insisted on knowing about its true bottom line. Martin felt obliged to inform her about the four magi, the Fjölnir wars, and the subsequent commercialisation of the story. Miriam was thoroughly flabbergasted, had to catch some fresh air, and so she and Ronald opted for the balcony.

Meanwhile, Bedirhan looked slightly ashamed as he stared at the ground. Before he knew what had happened to Tim, he had felt somewhat betrayed. *"I started to feel annoyed that he seemed so uninterested in our online business all of a sudden. Not in a thousand years would I have expected something like this to be the reason. Of course, he couldn't tell anybody without being labelled as crazy."* Franziska remained mute throughout the evening. No one could tell what she had gone through or what she was thinking. Dennis took the walnut wand his uncle had passed to him. *"Do you really think I'm able to conjure spells, Uncle Fricco?"* Fricco nodded eagerly, retrieved a glass from the shelf and filled it with water. "*Aim your wand at it and say 'Frusna iz aisa.' Imagine it freezing."* With trembling hands, Dennis summoned the charm and froze the water into ice. Marvelling at the wonder, he slowly came to terms with being a magician. The evening ended with mixed feelings, yet without any clear trace of a snitch, if he or she had even been present during the occasion. Sato Miko and Martin Fink, after bidding farewell to everyone, left the meeting. *"I'm glad we finally told them. It has been a hefty process, nevertheless. But we had to,"* Martin told the Japanese witch. *"We shouldn't give this conversation much value,"* she replied. *"If the time travelling works, this day won't have ever existed."*

#

On the dimly lit pedestrian zone of Forstquelle, Sharon Waterfield, now alias Emily Walton, gained an impression of the damage inflicted on the region. Most buildings bore scars from the conflict, the damage ranged from mild to severe, though the vast majority remained inhabitable. Yet, the atmosphere had drastically shifted. An air of sadness and resignation overshadowed everything, and the dark, cold, and damp weather only added to the gloom. A burned-out armoured vehicle stood frozen in its

moment of demise. On its side, the easily recognisable emblems of the LNO were visible. It had crashed against a police barricade, burying an unlucky officer beneath it. Since the Lancers had launched their coup, society had fractured into three factions: those who supported their feigned liberation, others determined to stop their plans, and the rest who were simply trying to survive. Sharon veiled her likeness beneath a dark hoodie. Stepping closer, she noticed a rocket launcher lying purposelessly on the road, not far from a wand. Engaging directly in battlefields with the usage of witchcraft was something the magical society had always strongly avoided, the risk of exposure being far too high. Now, there was no reason left to hold back, the harmony broken. Their code of secrecy had been abandoned by the LNO in favour of power and might.

Sharon felt a crystal-clear sense of recognition as she passed a building, a leftover from the 1800s. During her unintended time travelling with Tim and Miko, Sharon had encountered many such humble houses, stubbornly enduring through time and change. Calling the softening of her gaze a joyous smile would have been a blatant exaggeration; nevertheless, there was a visible flickering of hope in her expression. *"Some things seem strong enough to last through everything they face, trial and tribulation,"* she mumbled into her scarf. *"I wish I was as resilient as these houses."* Not many seconds had passed before she registered her own strong persistency, which elicited an encouraging sense of confidence. "*I'm giving myself too much slack."* Her glance fell downwards, upon a puddle of water. Its size was negligible, just big enough to reflect her image. "*From fixing computers to fixing the earth, what an adventure you freckled lass,"* she murmured at her mirrored likeness.

One building further along, a family had apparently turned their home into a fortress. Sandbags were piled on the windowsills and in front of the door. A young child cautiously peeked out, its eyes meeting Sharon's with an unspoken plea for help. Her own eyes brimmed with deep sympathy for the little creature. She felt an urge to comfort the child with all the German she could muster, telling them it was just a bad dream that would soon pass. In stark contrast of attitude and mindset, the neighbouring

building radiated light. Unfitting for the season, it had been garishly decorated with Christmas ornaments, though one could easily spot elements from Halloween and summer-themed festivals.

A plump woman in her thirties, with blue eyes and an infectious laugh, greeted her. She quickly switched from German to English upon realising she wasn't speaking with a local. *"Your house and your neighbour's look like they exist in two different realities. Why didn't you fortify, dear lady?"* Sharon's question prompted a brief moment of silence. The big woman looked contemplative. *"Mph, it shows how differently people react to situations, I suppose. See, I've lived a good life here, only left it to study art in Berlin. My parents were quite cold and heartless to me. For so long, I assumed I was to blame, but that was a misunderstanding."* Sharon felt captivated by the woman's personal story, barely noticing the digression from the topic. She introduced herself politely and continued listening. *"Studying forced me out of my comfort zone, and that's how I met a lot of good people, made plenty of friends. My point is, there will always be good and bad people entering and leaving your world. It's up to us whether we soak up all the negativity or focus on the good. If our time in this world is about to end, then I'll spend those last days celebrating with family and friends.*" The alarm startled her. *"Holy moly, the casserole needs my attention. Regardless of everything, I wish you a wonderful time, Emily."* After that light-hearted yet inspiring conversation, Sharon felt solidly motivated to give her absolute best, pushing magic to its limits. Beyond bringing Tim back to life, she now felt convinced of what she was fighting for, for the folks who struggled, the young child, and the quirky lady.

Two days of absolute radio silence followed. This measure was deliberately chosen to appear both indecisive and passive. Meanwhile, more and more contingents and allies of the LNO spread their struggle for control into countries all over the globe. If one were to take a look at the frontlines, which were increasingly consolidating, the image would resemble a camouflage pattern with loosely connected dots. Despite the fact that the new Lancers achieved local dominance throughout many regions, almost no state fell completely under their control. However, this could not necessarily be considered a defensive victory for their opponents either, as the situation rendered most countries entirely ungovernable.

After these two days of essentially playing dead came to an end, Theo attempted to establish communications with the Ghayat al Hakim. It turned out to be a far harder task than he had expected, due to the Arab order's own unusual circumstances.

#

Deep beneath the soil of Syria, eternal halls made of massive stones, built by the ancient Assyrians, had always served as their main base. Every major meeting, event and celebration took place at this remote location. In a tragic chain of events, it met the same fate that had struck Sato Miko's order's headquarters. Similar to the Japanese base, which lay beneath Amaterasu Ōmikami's shrine, it was taken over in a fierce and professionally executed surprise attack by the Jaish al Saharin. Yet their headquarters possessed a feature that proved vital for the order's continued existence: a secret tunnel hidden behind a movable column allowed the Ghayat al Hakim to escape. Every single one of their members made it out unharmed and alive, to the Jaish al Saharin's utmost anger. Fleeing westwards, they secured an inactive cruise liner. Its crew, feeling safer on the open sea, cooperated with the order in exchange for protection. The so-called 'Lady Ann' became a floating base for the order, functional but with its own critical weakness. As a civilian cruise ship, it would not be able to defend itself against weaponry such as anti-ship missiles or torpedoes. The Ghayat al Hakim were well aware of this and meticulously cast a protective layer one mile in radius around the vessel. In practice, it isolated the ship from all kinds of frequencies, rendering it invisible but also unreachable. Their leader eventually left the ship to gather supplies at an island. Only then did Theo's messages finally reach them.

High Staffwielder Theo's inquiry for assistance caught the Ghayat al Hakim's leaders' interest. Now, thousands of miles from home, the order finally saw a chance for retribution, although there was much more behind it than a simple tit for tat. Theo informed them that the target was of high priority and that, if executed correctly, it would deal a withering blow to the LNO. He specifically emphasised that storming this particular base would bring them one step closer to restoring harmony and the daylight, but he deliberately left out the 'how'. Despite this missing piece of information, the arguments he presented made it impossible for the Ghayat al Hakim to refuse their contribution. Hence, they disembarked from

the ship, equipped themselves with hovering barges the size of campers, powered by flying carpets and made their way to southern Germany.

#

Martin and Miko met them at the assembly of old, abandoned cars, passing over some instructions and the location of their new quarters. If one entered the spa park of Forstquelle from the northern direction and looked to the right, up the road above it, one would notice an old gym. The square black building with large glass windows was not a beautiful sight to behold. Built in the seventies, it had been constructed purely for practical purposes and could only be described as an ugly dark block. Martin was deeply involved in the planning and forged a cooperation with a young yet bright member of the Ghayat al Hakim, who operated under the codename Nadim. He raised several valid points, chiefly that thorough reconnaissance was necessary before beginning the undermining. After all, that was their main strength, though they had not known about the existence of speaking ravens. Excitement filled the room as Miko introduced one of these mystical animals. *"This one is called 'Thought.' This little apparatus on his claw is a talking device, constantly tuned in during his flight. You can connect a phone to it or a walkie-talkie, even a tiny action camera. That means we can stream the image from Thought's point of view."* As soon as Miko concluded her explanation, Fink added, *"Perfect for our mission."* Nadim raised a suspicious brow. *"I can see the advantage of those fascinating birds, but I'm sure the Lancers most likely have their own."*

Martin nodded. *"Undoubtedly so, and they linger everywhere, just like ours. We even encountered some air combat between the animals, but that's rather scarce. However, the devices on their own are really hard to notice due to their small size, meaning that each raven could just as well be a regular wild one. Only the act of speaking reveals it."* The Raven croaked in audible annoyance. *"Can't you see the most obvious solution here?"* he uttered in his rusty voice. *"Show me a map of the valley and I'll circle around the area, providing you with the location of every single tree and stone."* Martin, already convinced, glanced at Nadim, who indicated his approval with a pursing of the lips and an

appreciative nod. *"Solid suggestion, my man,"* Theo, who had overheard their evaluation, agreed. *"What's particularly interesting to us are slopes, dense arrays of trees, anything that could block the view."* The air within the old plain building was thick, as everyone understood there was little to no room for mistakes. *"How far below the ground can you dig the tunnels?"* Martin Fink inquired.

Another member of the clan, who refrained from revealing his name, leaned forward and rested his forehead in his palm, deep in thought. *"There are a lot of sandstones and granite beneath the surface here. Magic, as we all know, is fuelled by the wizard's own energy. The 'ihtazz thumma tasallab' charm is very demanding, as a lot of physical force is working against you. When dealing with soft ground, we usually advance up to five kilometres, five thousand five hundred yards, but taking all the sandstones and maybe even granite into consideration..."* He gestured with his fingers while silently pondering realistic estimations. *"In the worst case, about one and a half kilometres."* Theo traced his fingers through his brown braided beard. *"From the intelligence we've gathered, it appears the Lancer fortified the perimeter and scattered surveillance cameras all around it. We urgently need to find out how far their network of cameras really stretches into the woods, and where possible blind spots are."* Despite the difficulties at hand, he swiftly found a solution. *"I want every single stock of invisibility potion spared for the assault. We have to move in utmost secrecy. Further, I suggest some diversionary manoeuvre to distract them, maybe a loud bang or perhaps a remote skirmish."*

At the very same day, Thought the clever raven took off, his mission clear in mind as he stubbornly flew towards the old hospital complex. The ever-present darkness helped to disguise him, though at the same time made visibility a real challenge. Theo had pre-emptively solved the issue by equipping him with night vision cameras. The attentive raven cruised above the black forest, an endless dense canopy of needle trees, which looked even more archaic and sinister during these dark days. Stark curiosity kept Martin and Nadim fully awake as they followed their raven's flight on the monitor. *"I'm*

about a kilometre away from the hospital. Further up, it's clearly visible. About to descend below the tree line, over." Although strained and crackly through the walkie-talkie, Martin understood Thought clearly. *"Understood and affirmative, over,"* Martin replied to his feathered colleague. *"It's like something straight out of a horror movie,"* Nadim murmured, slightly apprehensive as he followed the bird's flight above the wild forest. *"Not used to dense woodlands?"* Martin asked, a paper-thin hint of bragging in his tone, revealing his familiarity with the region. *"Same as you with deserts,"* Nadim shot back as a rejoinder.

Worried about even the slightest chance of being detected, Theo took over the microphone. His next order came in an assertive tone that left no room for argument. *"From now on, clandestine silence, Thought. If we discover anything interesting, we'll screenshot it ourselves, over."* The bird circled the perimeter at a slow pace. Every slope, uneven patch of ground and sight-blocking obstacle was photographed and marked as a point of strategic interest. "*A large overgrown rock, perfect..."* Martin mumbled. "*Maybe a little too perfect, but we'll keep it in mind,"* Nadim suggested. *"Powerful stuff, powerful stuff,"* he repeated as more and more pictures were taken and stored. For a brief moment, one of the narrow roads leading to the former hospital complex came into view. *"There are some people living nearby in this remote location. The whole place can be reached by road from three directions. North into the valley, south, and upwards, eventually leading to a few hamlets perched on the mountaintop*," Martin commented.

Theo placed his hands on Nadim's and Martin's shoulders to support his athletic frame. *"I need a coffee break. Once you're in your forties, you'll understand, lacking energy. Keep going, lads, we're on a good track.."* The High Staffwielder disappeared into the old gym's kitchen to invigorate his senses with a strong coffee, while Thought flew above another road that connected the area to Kühltal. A yellow VW Polo steadily meandered its way upwards. Martin opened his eyes as a shock nearly froze him. The

vehicle's licence plate seemed oddly familiar, there was a feeling of recognition steering him. *"I know you shouldn't come closer. Follow the vehicle, use the treeline as cover. It's important,"* Fink ordered the Raven, who deviated from his previous instructions. *"Did you forget about the safety distance, or are you bullocks, mate?"* the young Arab scolded, both taken aback and annoyed. "*This is on me. If anything goes wrong, I'll take full responsibility*," Martin assured him with pressing assertiveness. *"Fine... do what you have to do,"* Nadim relented, irritation audible in his voice.

When the driver finally parked his vehicle at a discreet corner of the narrow road, Martin at last got a good view, not only of the licence plate, but also of the person behind the wheel. Quickly and clearly, he told the bird to return to its original course. Martin and Nadim's relief caused them to almost melt into their chairs, covering their foreheads with their hands and releasing deep breaths. Whatever information Martin's persistent subordination might gain them, at the very least, they hadn't alarmed the LNO. Theo came back refreshed and gave both a confirming thumbs-up. *"Brilliant, we'll soon be done."* As soon as the bearded High Staffwielder moved away, Martin closely observed the pictures. His memory resonated strongly with the woman's profile, as well as with the car. *"Bloody hell, we're close. Very, very close. In the name of Ailill Belenus, not in a hundred years did I see that coming,"* Martin Fink whispered conspiratorially. *"Do you know her?"* Nadim inquired, his curiosity peaking. "*If my sense of recognition is to be trusted, and that girl's there for more than a stride through the woods, then we might have just caught this particular snitch."*

Chapter Twenty one – Operation Blizzard

Still stationed in the old gym and poised for action, the Ghayat al Hakim undertook their final preparations, mentally attuned for a difficult mission. A major challenge they faced was the harsh soil beneath their adversaries' headquarters. The geological setup of the Black Forest was highly

unpredictable. They could either be lucky and deal with a softer composition of sandstone, or be challenged by sturdy granite during their mining efforts. Alongside them stood Task Force Fir, a small yet proficient team consisting of Sharon, Martin, Miko, Richard, Lopt, Theo, Fricco, and Dennis. Under the guidance of both his father and uncle, Dennis received rigorous and thorough training. These family members neither forced nor persuaded him into witchcraft. Instead, a stark longing brewed within him, a powerful urge for revenge. Not only had the LNO taken the life of one of his closest friends, Tim, but the conflict they had instigated had also robbed him of a part of his identity. Dennis proved a surprisingly fast learner, despite a prolonged lack of familiarity with the subject.

Dressed in pitch-black combat gear and silver bandanas for the purpose of recognition amongst themselves, Task Force Fir looked like a formidable special unit. Beside them, the Ghayat al Hakim resembled Tuareg nomads, their faces covered except for their eyes, which they would cover with protective glasses when working underground. Theo gave final instructions using a map pinned to a cupboard with magnets. *"This is the day we're going to demolish their spooky castle. For once, we can strike them where it hurts and beat them with their own strategy, namely appropriating the initiatives. We're going to strike just like them, unannounced, and avoid being predictable. In that spirit, we shall let it appear as a full-on assault. But instead, we'll let their panic work in our favour and stay reserved. The Ghayat will start constructing the tunnel directly behind this reverse slope."*
He pointed his index finger at a sector eastwards of the base.

"Richard and Emily will take position in the east, Martin and Miko will operate from the north, Fricco and Dennis from the west. Lopt and I will position ourselves to the south. Avoid engaging with the Lancers even after the building collapses. Let's restrain movement until a good opportunity arises. The only real reason for us being there is the chance of entering if they abandon the base. Therefore, we need to monitor the damage carefully to evaluate whether an intrusion is possible or not." Theo had barely finished his statement when a rocket crashed through the ceiling. In an instance of incomprehensible

dumb luck, it harmed no one but struck a large, light green iron cabinet from the 1980s. The integrated explosives didn't ignite. Richard stepped closer, casting a perceptive glance at the weapon. *"Speaking of taking the initiative and being unpredictable..."* With careful movements, he unscrewed the rocket's head, which housed the charge and a broomstick integrated into the structure. *"There are some enchantments written on it, and a camera. Well, the first wizard-made guided rocket system. The runic enchantments bind that broom to the operator's wand, a camera provides visuals, and an explosive charge detonates on contact. Without relying on fuel, these things have the potential to cross insane distances. Luckily for us, that iron comrade..."* Evidently relieved, he patted the cabinet. *"This material was strong enough to stop it, yet gave in just enough to save us all." "Maybe we should reward that rugged furniture with a medal,"* Sato Miko mused. "*Or place it in a museum one day,"* Sharon, alias Emily Walton, added.

Theo couldn't relate to the light-hearted chatter and frowned. *"They must have observed us. Perhaps when the Ghayat al-Hakim entered*," he considered pensively. Nadim scanned the weapon system in front of him, both fascinated and worried. "*Now I understand what you meant when you said there's mutual surveillance going on. Is the camera intact?"* the young Arab asked. "*That would be better for us if it wasn't, since they might send another one that detonates.*" Martin removed the camera and saw, to his concern, that it was still intact. To avoid being hit by a follow-up strike, both the TFF and GH moved out of their temporary base and, under a thick layer of invisibility potion, vanished from the scene. They travelled swiftly through the uphill forest on foot, used the treeline for as much cover as possible, and adopted a scattered formation to appear like refugees.

Two hours later, within LNO's lair, no one saw the looming attack coming. Although the mood among the order was conflicted, their initial enthusiasm had begun to waver. Karl Surt summoned Sister Monkhood, Deadly Nightshade, Angel's Trumpet, and Raintree into his office. This room was one of the few not positioned underground but on the top floor, just below the attic. Connected to the bunker system via a private lift and a minuscule emergency staircase, his office was completely isolated from the other rooms. Its interior blended early twentieth-century aesthetics with modern LNO equipment and regional

touches, such as a cuckoo clock. Whilst the four each occupied a seat, Surt cast a thoughtful, stoic gaze out of the window, facing the outside world. *"Waterfield is dead, and so are Meyer and the Pillar of Light. We control much land around the globe. Rome, Washington, Moscow, and Peking were just about to fall. But then, this entire operation has lost its momentum. We are stuck in our tracks, and that's not even the worst news."* The four looked at each other in despair, quivering with anticipation of the bad news to follow.

"Two hours ago, our benign leader Munrir, understood solely by a few, feared by the corrupt, supposed to turn this planet into a haven of justice and goodwill, died." Surt was fighting to remain composed, battling with inner turmoil. *"When we informed him that the border between the Czech Republic and Bavaria was fully controlled by us, he insisted on ascending for the first time after these two long millennia. Our local brother described his demeanour as triumphant, full of energy, joyful. They were just about to escort him to Munich, which had just been taken by us, when a disoriented infantry fighting vehicle shot him directly in the chest with its high-calibre weaponry."* An air of shock and perplexity filled the room. Sister Monkhood stared at the desk in front of her, much like someone regretting all her former decisions. *"The war is neither lost nor won. We crossed the Rubicon. The bridge behind us has just collapsed."* Raintree, with his thick Bavarian accent, hesitantly suggested an exasperated measure.

"*The least we can try is to negotiate an armistice with the White Magic Alliance and other governments. It goes without saying that in their eyes we're dangerous terrorists, yet they can't beat us either."* Surt turned around in his chair. *"Less violence. Time to recover and consolidate. Sounds proper." "We recently attacked a band of magicians dressed in Middle Eastern attire at Forstquelle, after our ravens took note of that unidentified threat. Allow me to send a raven to them with an invitation to negotiate a contemporary peace deal."* All of a sudden, the floor beneath them gave way, causing the

five to fall downwards. Swiftly, the ramming charm was put to good use as they desperately stopped larger logs, bricks, and roof tiles from knocking them out. The massive building's front leaned dangerously into the valley before the pressure overextended the wall's stability. Like capable woodcutters, the Ghayat al Hakim dug their tunnel at a forty-five degree angle pointing into the woods below, into the valley's narrow swathe.

#

Dennis and his uncle, feeling the pressure of the old estate crashing in their direction, mounted their brooms and performed an evasive manoeuvre northwards. A hint of sorrowful whimsy swept through Dennis as he saw the remnants of this historically significant hospital, a part of his surroundings' history, lying defeated amidst trees and moss. The picture unfolding before him stood as a metaphor for the irreversible damage done, the point of no return that had been reached. A message on Broomracer 101, sent by High Staffwielder Theo to the group, occupied Sharon's attention. Her comrade Richard perceptively kept observing their perimeter. *"Anything new?"* he asked, wondering about a possible change of plans. Sharon read through the new advice to calm her own curiosity. *"He wrote that their underground base is exposed from above and that the LNO members have begun fleeing unorganised in a northern direction. Miko and Martin are told to bail out."* Richard and Sharon made their way through the sea of trees, reaching a position that provided a perfect overview but bore the risk of being easily seen. The two crawled up to the overlook and took note of about seventy LNO officers and fighters, leaving the area on the road leading northwards further down the valley, away from Kühltal. Martin and Miko approached from the side, announcing themselves with two clicking sounds.

The small detachment of Task Force Fir members regrouped near a hole in the ceiling, which gave access to the underground facility. It was the first time in history that a magical order other than the LNO had entered this well-hidden base. Theo and Lopt illuminated their path using the "*Skinan brathin"* charm, while the others had their wands drawn, combat-ready, as they navigated each empty floor and every room during their expedition. Upon reaching the armoury, they found an abundance of brooms, iron cabinets filled with potions and equipment and even some mildly damaged UFOs. The group's eyes

reflected both disdain and awe at their enemy's arsenal. In particularly a vast collection of rockets of various sizes, some ready for deployment, others still under construction, caught their attention. *"Look, those are the very same rockets as the one that struck us earlier. They've got loads of them,"* Richard Midländer remarked in wonder. "*Good thing we took down this base early on*," Martin Think added. *"Those were probably commissioned for a renewed offensive."*

Step by step, they made their way through the futuristic headquarters. With the electricity completely down, the group felt safe from traps and cameras. A few more steps brought them to an empty prison complex, where there appeared to be no prisoners, each cell stood vacant. *"Look at them, friends,"* Theo said with utmost seriousness. *"I'd bet my beard they built these to imprison fellow magicians who dared to stand against them and Munrir. This could have been our place if they'd managed to succeed."* Eventually, they found one cell occupied by an individual whose very presence seemed to defy sanity. Inside was a man with tan skin, who appeared neither old nor young, trapped within a ball of energy in which a daily-life scene unfolded. The people passing by inside it wore attire that had been in fashion ten years earlier. Courageously, Sharon approached him. *"Good day to you. We are part of an order that opposes the LNO. The base is under our control now. I trust you understand why we find ourselves curious about this strange ball surrounding you."* The man stood as though to greet the TFF, but could not escape the confines of his dimensional prison. *"My name is Lucas Portillo. What you see here is a mishap in time travelling, one of its possible dangers."*

Everyone's curiosity was piqued, as they were acutely aware that time travel was the only remaining way to save the world. All were worried about the possibility of something going wrong during the process. Lucas read their disheartened faces and began retracing the steps that had led him into this predicament. *"Back in 2006, I expected my life to follow a predictable course. Now it sounds like nothing more than wishful thinking. I'm a magician, just like yourselves, from a Spanish order. Sadly, I lost touch with them while being here, which alienated me from those I once considered family."* There was sadness

carved into his face as he spoke, his voice coloured with sorrow. *"It all went awry when I lost my job as a car salesman. The company I worked for went bankrupt. The love of my life had already moved in. We were excited to start our life as a couple. We didn't ask for anything more than a decent living, but with my unemployment, our financial situation turned dire. A few days before New Year's Eve, I dreamt about winning the lottery and clearly saw the exact numbers. However, I didn't place much trust in this prophetic dream and brushed it aside. When the final draw of the year was announced, I realised the numbers were indeed the winning ones. I had lost the opportunity to win over three million euros, money I could've badly needed."*

Dennis leaned against a column, confused. *"What does this have to do with time travel?"* *"As a wizard, I'd heard about the concept of time travel. My grandma once told me about it,"* Lucas continued. *"Desperate to turn back time, I got back in touch with my Spanish order, Las Manzanas de la Juventud. They accepted me with a hint of suspicion, which was justified. It is said that, if one makes a significant enough sacrifice into a well located beneath the roots of a magnificent ash tree, it enables you to travel to literally any day you wish. The sacrifice must be a magical hammer. Legends state that a mythical blacksmith placed an array of enchanted hammers all around the globe. The only one we know about is believed to be hidden behind a portal somewhere beneath the Acropolis."* Now Miko pressed him. *"So what went wrong? Didn't you find it?"* Portillo shook his head.

"I did, but the protective enchantment cast by a wise and powerful unknown wizard, who legends say was also an architect, caught me off guard. Knowing that free access to time travel would inevitably lead to chaos and abuse, he placed a curse on it. The hammer can only be retrieved safely if the seeker's true intention is beneficial for humanity. This second dimension you see around me is a window into 2006, yet I can't interact with it. I'm invisible and mute to these people who pass by. I can see it with my left eye, you with my right. The consequence of said defensive spells." Sharon absorbed his words like a

sponge. Was her cause selfless enough to spare her from such a fate? "*I guess you must hold a grudge against this mystical wizard?"* she asked. *"No, I don't, not anymore. I've learned to understand him,"* Lucas replied. *"See, if non-wizards had found me, they'd have dissected me as a scientific abnormality. The LNO tried to misuse my experience for their own gain. That ancient wizard himself was believed murdered when other magicians forced him to share his knowledge. He chose to die rather than be responsible for the complete disruption of space and time. A secret hero, whose tale is the only trace of his existence."*

Seconds of contemplative silence followed until the Spaniard spoke again. *"Albeit most human beings, magical or not, possess good intentions, their lack of understanding of the greater scheme of things simply doesn't make them fit to handle such powers. The more mighty and advanced a form of magic becomes, the more wisdom and understanding is required to wield it. Only a few select individuals are ripe enough to pull off time travelling without messing with time and space. This is why I accept my punishment, however long it may last."* During Lucas Portillo's declaration, the energetic circle around him began to fade until he was finally set free with his last word. He could barely process his luck, and the others shared his joy. Everybody seemed amazed by this unpredictable turn of events. It was as if this wondrous wizard had included a counter curse to his enchantments. In a combined effort of both spell craft and physical force, the TFF freed Lucas from the prison cell. Now he stood amongst them as a free man.

Theo instantly realised how fortunate this serendipitous encounter was. He felt eager to make the best of this newly gained momentum, excitement evident in his tone. *"We need to escort him out of here before the enemy changes their mind and returns, not to mention any leftover working surveillance devices that may still be lingering somewhere." "What about our main base?"* Richard suggested, raising a brow. *"Too far away, remember we walked here,"* Theo answered dismissively. *"The old gym!"* Miko

proposed enthusiastically, but the High Staffwielder dismissed the idea once more. *"LNO ravens might still hold positions there and observe the sector. If they see us moving back in, we might get warmly greeted by their remaining forces."* Dennis ventured another suggestion, though it too was unsuccessful. *"How about the now-abandoned elementary school in Forstquelle? You'd have quite the overview from there, and it's a sturdy piece of architecture." "Both of your points are valid,"* Theo replied.*" Apparently, a dispatched LNO assault brigade had the same idea and turned that marvel into a fortress. The wizards there even dug a trench and conjured a wall of fire around it."* All of a sudden, a thought formed within Martin Fink's mind. By this move, he revealed the secret hideout of himself, Sharon, and Miko, but it was necessary, the only viable option. *"Some parts of the valley have changed hands over and over again, but I'm confident we still have Forstquelle's skiing hut. Thought to be abandoned, and it's seated at a strategically unimportant opening within the woods, after all, meaning they're most likely not planning to delegate any forces there."* His suggestion was met with approving nods. *"Perfect, perfect, perfect.* Good to have some flexible minds around."

#

Carefully and wordlessly, Portillo and the TFF meandered their way outside to leave the lion's cave. As they passed the new Lancers' armoury, Sato Miko stopped, placing a seemingly ordinary Japanese vessel next to the entrance. The rest cast curious stares at her. *"Akihiro invented this. It's a trap. Each time somebody steps over the doorway, the room will shine with a bright, blinding light. It's hard to detect and renders the room useless."*

The group bade farewell to the Order of Ghayat al Hakim, assuring them that their work was a vital component in their brilliantly executed plans. Furthermore, they proclaimed that the Order would be thanked accordingly. The Arab Order humbly responded that they had merely done what needed to be done. Nevertheless, the successfully commenced mission had raised their motivation and reinstated trust within themselves. Thus, they made their way back to their home to combat the Jaish al Saharin and

reclaim what was once theirs, their base. Sharon Waterfield still found herself emotionally conflicted about the prospect of time travel. The new people she had met, like Lucas and Hugo, or the jolly woman who decorated her home to fight darkness with joy, everything would fade into a distant whisper of memory from a past that never happened. But at least she would know, and could make the best of the experiences that had shaped her. Most importantly, she knew that bringing back sunlight and looking into her dearly missed Tim's eyes was a heartfelt obligation she was more than willing to strive for.

#

Through the darkness, the TFF, with Lucas Portillo in their company, arrived at the skiing hut, this time approaching from a completely different path to avoid being spotted by the perceptive eyes of the praying enemy ravens. The magicians were astonished as they observed Sharon's enchanted wall. Only Martin and Miko appeared reserved, having already witnessed the bewitched entrance. Effortlessly, the structure transformed into a door and then back into a wall as they entered. Inside, only a dim light provided minimal illumination. Further planning was now on the agenda, with no third party permitted to eavesdrop, which is why Dennis, Fricco, Richard, and Martin guarded each side of the skiing hut with drawn wands. Meanwhile, within the rustic confines, Theo and Sharon informed Lucas about their plan to time travel to restore cosmic order. Portillo, already familiar with the grounds of the Acropolis, a necessity for finding the mystical hammer, agreed to help without hesitation.

Chapter Twenty two – The unthinkable Suspect

Martin Fink couldn't find rest, plagued as he was by the curse that pressing uncertainty can be. The yellow Polo struck him as painfully familiar, but there were many such vehicles, and the shape of the woman he saw sparked some recognition, though it wasn't clear-cut evidence either. Despite all his

energetic efforts and initial certainty, he couldn't uncover the crucial missing link. This last missing piece brought Sharon's time-travel plan to an abrupt halt, as the snitch who had thwarted so many of their schemes was still out there. The skies remained darkened, the world still steeped in sorrow. As an independently operating Task Force, the TFF had no obligation to engage in the ongoing battles. Both sides of the conflict continued to depend heavily on non-magical supporters, and humanity remained divided. Sharon Waterfield's resolve too, was beginning to crumble, slowly but surely, with each passing fruitless day. The entire situation strained her fortitude, especially the existence of that one unknown, treacherous individual. *"Sometimes one person alone can change the world, for better or worse*," Sharon yawned, her exhaustion unbearable. To preserve her sanity, she simply had to step out into the world beyond her rustic, traditional confinement.

#

Carefully, she hiked through the woods until she reached the forest's edge, where Kühltal met the wilderness. As she cast her gaze towards the war-torn small town, which had already witnessed a large-scale drive-by of a spaceship armada, rocket attacks, and ground combat, Sharon noticed something had changed. There wasn't a single gunshot to be heard, no rays of light or lightning bolts erupting from wizards' wands. It was so quiet one might assume it was simply a dark winter's day. Although Sharon hadn't forgotten what had happened, her sanity clung desperately to the notion that this ought to be a day in August, filled with warmth and blossoms. A wave of melancholy washed over her as she stared at the empty space where Tim and his parents' house ought to have stood.

A martial rattling of tank tracks disrupted the moment of gloomy silence, drawing Sharon's attention away from the fleeting moments of the past she yearned to return to. She quickly retrieved her phone, using the zoom of its camera like a telescope. One of the thick spellbook's enchantments, historically used to improve the clarity of binoculars, helped her enhance the camera's capability. Further northwards, somewhere in Kühltal's industrial park, she spotted the source of the noise. Through the cold darkness, near a burning warehouse, two forces were about to clash. One party bore the New Lancers'

emblems, the other the white Magical Alliance insignia, which Sharon always thought looked like a green snowflake on a white background. The LNO used to ridicule the white background, since it was typically used to signal surrender, though in this conflict they had proved to be as fierce as the Lancers. The upcoming engagement's battle order was a perfect example of the conflict's nature. Each side possessed a tank, one support vehicle, soldiers, police officers. Heavily armed magicians, whose combat gear rendered them almost indistinguishable from regular soldiers, were present as well.

Sharon's excellent optics revealed some significant insight. The opposing bands seemed exhausted and worn out, their eyes devoid of the will to throw themselves into combat. One of the policemen dropped his machine pistol, a magician removed his LNO headpiece and armband, and the tank's crew, encouraged by their platoon's reluctance, stepped out with a white flag. Sharon was much too far to hear what was spoken, but the Lancers' contingent seemed to reach out to their enemies and some sort of exchange took place. The other side mimicked their adversaries' attitude and abandoned their fighting stance as well. Apparently, there was no steam left to power the civil war's machine. Sharon Waterfield stood there, observing the scene alone. Had she been in company, she would have found herself equally speechless. She tried to gather more impressions, to discern if this was truly a new paradigm or merely an isolated case. In doing so, she noticed more and more equipment and insignia abandoned, concluding that this must indeed be the new normal. The loud chatter of a high-calibre machine cannon, echoing through the valley's depths, startled her once more. This time, she saw a literal isolated case unfolding.

Some hundred yards to the right, further down the hill, she spotted a young female witch, probably around her age, who was single-handedly fighting off an anti-air system and its machine cannon. From the outside, it looked like a callous man-versus-machine battle. Yet she seemed to be skilfully outsmarting the crew by throwing invisibility potions to conceal herself. A magnificently cast lightning spell had destroyed part of its electronic systems, and the crew had apparently begun to blast away her

cover lightly. If not for a man-high concrete wall that usually served as a border between the parking spaces and the train station, there wouldn't have been much chance of survival for the young witch. Zooming in on her insignia, Sharon realised that the girl was fighting for the LNO, the enemy. Yet, regardless of alliances, she felt compassion for her, seeing the young female witch as a fellow human and witch. Sharon knew she had to act. She rushed down the hill. The anti-air vehicle was about to destroy the last remaining piece of cover. A forceful pressure flushed through Sharon's veins. Senseless bloodshed had to be avoided. This time, failure was not an option.

Summoning all the energy at her disposal, she aimed her wand between the turret and the hull. She yelled, *"Frusna iz aisa!"* A thick layer of ice rendered the turret unusable, its function completely disabled. Discouraged, the crew turned their vehicle around and left the scene. Sharon Waterfield now prepared herself to carefully approach the witch, her wand still firmly grasped in her hand, ready for a potential confrontation. Yet, responding to her unspoken hope, the young witch took off her head- and armband. Even the balaclava concealing her identity was thrown onto the cold grey road. Sharon hitched , it was none other than Franziska Eibe, one of Tim Meyer's closest friends. Franziska realised that the person in front of her was no fellow LNO member. Her vigour was thoroughly drained by the conflict, and she used the moment to capitulate. *"I can't take it anymore. Feel like I'm ageing ten years in two months. It's too much, I say, too much. I want my normal life back, normalcy back with all its boring aspects*." This exasperated plea, spoken with a breathy tone of worry and discomfort, stirred even more compassion within Sharon.

It had become clear that Sharon's makeover had worked like a charm, Franziska didn't recognise her in the slightest. She thought it would be wise to retreat up the hill again, in order to regain both distance and an overview, not just in a physical sense but mentally as well. Unknowingly, Sharon's decision proved to be a critical breakthrough, as Franziska, now slowly recovering from the previous ordeal, indulged in a long monologue. Franziska informed Sharon about her upbringing in vivid detail,

recounting the day she was captured by the new Lancers as a child, received new parents alongside a new name, and was forced into their recruitment. Her parents were given generous indemnities and harsh threats. They were promised they would be killed if they ever dared to speak of it. Franziska expressed herself at length about the golden times with Tim and his friends, a hint of sadness and regret making her voice shaky and unstable. Sharon's eyes widened in shock as Franziska deliberately revealed that she had been the nefarious snitch all along. The young Scot had to feign a neutral demeanour.

"The idea of freezing Tim on the bridge back then was discomforting enough," Franziska confessed, as unshed tears began to gather in her eyes. *"But when we were ordered to cast a spell on Tim and Sharon during the column's destruction, I didn't follow through. I cast the spell at the ceiling instead. I want to be straight with you, Emily. When I saw Tim with Sharon for the first time, I tried to find something reprehensible about her, but she didn't give the impression of being a nuisance to progress like my order thinks her to be. I even felt so happy for the two of them, thinking they would look like a cute couple. Totally convinced that our order would do good in the world and against my intuition, I took part in the final mission. But striking down Tim or his companion…"* She shook her head, the unprocessed trauma escaping through her confession. *"That was too much. Look around us..."* Franziska gestured towards the endless dark abyss. *"We were promised that the pillar would eventually be restored after our global takeover, reassured that it would be a swift and easy fight with only a few ignorant fools opposing us. Now, you clearly see more and more desertions, magicians, soldiers, police, and civilians alike, they're realising that we've been fed lies and contradicting promises. I'd give my life to change that."*

Hope arose within Sharon Waterfield as she processed these words, delivered in a sincere melody, a yearning plea to change things for the better. Not only did it prove that Franziska, and most probably other LNO members, weren't thoroughly evil, but her reluctance down in old Memphis had saved Sharon's life and, subsequently, offered the chance of a new beginning. *"Show me that you really mean what you've said, and believe me or not, there is a way out of this horrible timeline*," Sharon urged, her

eyes seeking contact with Franziska's. The young brunette retrieved a holster holding a handgun and ammunition, hidden in her combat gear. "*That's my last weapon. It may not be magical in nature, but it's lethal nonetheless."* She stood up, took off her tactical vest and threw it down the hill. *"You never know if it's bugged or not. I can't trust the Lancers any longer. Now we can safely talk in private."*
Sharon accepted this symbolic distancing from Franziska's ties to the order and considered revealing her true identity.

"Franziska, my name is not really Emily Waterfield. My hair is chestnut brown, not black. I am Sharon Waterfield. By not casting lightning on me, you've inadvertently preserved a way to save it all , but for this, I need your support and loyalty. We rescued an individual from your prison complex called Lucas Portillo. He knows about a safe method to travel through time, but only if the magician's intentions are selfless and oriented towards the common good." Franziska frowned, irritated, her bewilderment causing her voice to rise in pitch. *"Prison complex? We've never been told about it! Our leadership always frowned upon the concept of holding people captive for a long time." "It's been a farce,"* Sharon explained passionately. "*Each of you has been sold another lie. Your order was superb in manipulation tactics. Ask yourself why you've only been told vague slogans, why integral parts like the existence of a prison complex were kept a secret."* Franziska swiftly grew more and more outraged and disappointed by it all, now finally ready to forge a new alliance. "*I'm coming with you, Sharon. Let's travel through time together. As a team, we'll be able to twist fate."* Touched by these words, Sharon hugged her former enemy.

Now, there was no reason left to further postpone the time travelling. On the very same day, Sharon assembled the entire TFF and announced that the snitch was no longer a problem. She took Franziska with her to the skiing hut, chatting wittily with her the entire way in order to gain further confirmation of her change of heart and to familiarise herself with her. As they entered the rustic abode,

the fireplace was already lit, and vivid, hysterical chatter filled the room. Lopt, Richard, Theo, Miko, Martin, Fricco, and Dennis all aimed their wands at the now-frightened Franziska. *"So, you filthy snake, you were the one trying to kill me? Blowing up my apartment to cover it up? Who was it, speak!"* Martin hissed angrily, an unusual expression for him, rarely displayed. *"No, it wasn't me! Sister Deadly Nightshade was behind the skin-shifting infiltration. She's never told me her real name. The only thing she mentioned was her sham workplace, the Southern Ends gas station,"* Franziska desperately tried to defend herself from these emotion-driven accusations. *"So that's why the voice seemed so familiar,"* Martin stated, and allowed his anger towards Franziska to gradually fade.

Lucas Portillo now entered the scene. He sensed that trust in Franziska had yet to be established, so he took the most pragmatic approach. *"Look, folks, you don't necessarily like this witch. However, it's probably essential that the two travel together. Hear me out."* The Spaniard stepped into the centre of the room, seeking everyone's attention. *"Only the time travellers themselves will be conscious of the shift in time. None of us will be aware that this meeting ever took place. Hence, we need this new version of Franziska to change things for the better alongside Sharon."* The group began to feel conflicted, as not all the things that had happened during their adventures were bad. Yet Sharon managed to convince them with an array of sincere promises. *"Please don't be sad. I'll make sure to preserve all the good things that took place. We'll get Miko off Neon Island, Dennis will be informed about his magical abilities, and I'll painstakingly archive everything we've learned through our adventure on paper."*

Sharon's guarantee fostered a shared sense of purpose and acknowledgement within the group, yet one problem remained. *"Guys..."* Lucas interrupted persistently. *"We still need a vehicle that can carry more than two people, something faster than a regular broom and not dependent on safe roads like cars are. Franziska and Sharon need me to show them the relic's exact location."* Theo adopted a pensive expression and nodded. *"He's right. This time, we need to play it one hundred percent safe, using every*

advantage at our disposal." "*Let's just steal one of the LNO's functioning UFOs,"* Franziska suggested confidently. *"The base is completely exposed and most certainly still unguarded. We don't even need to drag it to the launch station, since there's basically no ceiling left."* The High Staffwielder raised his open palm, his eyes widening in surprise, before a calm nod hinted at his agreement. *"I can't argue with that, it's probably the best option we've got. Let's proceed with our classic approach, code words, observation ravens, reinforcements and…"* He paused for a moment to hold everybody in suspense. *"..another chance for a petite payback session. Operation July Schedule shall be our last mission in this timeline."*

#

Approximately an hour later, the operation was underway. Their first precaution was to eliminate any remaining means of electronic surveillance left to the LNO. For this reason, the TFF destroyed every single overland line to cut the base's electricity, hoping that the dark order didn't have any generators in reserve. To achieve this, they constructed their own guided rockets. Still in possession of the Lancers' dud shot, they had nothing more to do than simply copy its build. A surgically conducted missile barrage preceded the vanguard, which was split into two flanks. On the extreme left were Martin and Miko. On the extreme right, Dennis and his uncle Fricco. In the centre, Sharon Waterfield, Lucas Portillo and Franziska Eibe advanced, while the rear was secured by Lopt and Richard. Theo took responsibility for observation and coordination, assisted by Lopt's raven, 'Sky Eye.' A snowstorm provided the best visual cover Sharon and her comrades could have hoped for. Franziska stumbled into a particularly thick layer and, without Sharon's help, would have struggled to free herself. *"Thank you, sis. I can't wait to go back to warmer days again,"* she remarked enthusiastically. The wind howled eerily along.

"Couldn't agree more," Sharon replied. "*Not to mention the prospect of saving all these people who've lost their lives in our timeline. I can't begin to imagine how satisfying it must feel to have everything set straight again."* Theo interrupted the girls' chatter. "*Parameter is clear, advance to Point Yellow."* This message indicated that the ruins, which had once been the LNO's headquarters, were free

of guards. *"Does it mean we should enter already?"* Both Franziska and Sharon were unsure, exchanged glances, and shrugged. They drew their wands and carefully entered through a large crack in the basement ceiling. This momentary lack of communication proved dangerous, as the trio accidentally aimed their wands at Miko and Martin, startled by their unexpected close proximity. Almost levitating from the released tension, Miko remarked breathlessly, *"Oh dear God, you've freaking scared us." "Let's just stick together instead of playing hide and seek,"* Lucas suggested. His demeanour quickly shifted into a display of anxiousness, given that he'd once been imprisoned within these very same walls.

Eventually, they reached the armoury. To everyone's surprise, the room was brightly lit. "*My trap, the vessel I placed around the wall,"* Miko whispered, barely audible. All but Franziska understood what that meant, there must be people inside. A witty thought sparked in Portillo's mind. *"You placed it right next to the door, right? How about carefully retrieving it while the rest of us hide in this unobtrusive chamber just to the right along the hallway?"* Everyone agreed and went into position.
Carefully, the Japanese witch grabbed the small vessel. One of the LNO members happily remarked, *"Hey, somebody turned it off! We can finally see!"* Yet another spotted her. *"Intruder! Let's turn her into dust!"* Dozens of spells were cast in Miko's direction, though she managed to dodge them. While being pursued through the intricate hallways, a wondrous beam of light, which cracked through the ceiling, revealed a puddle of water on the floor caused by a leaking tube. The agile Asian witch jumped onto a box, kicked it away, and conjured the Kori ni koru charm onto the wet ground. The water beneath her froze, sending her pursuers sliding helplessly down the stairs.

"Sector is clear now, we can proceed!" Miko proclaimed after knocking on the door behind which her friends had taken cover. *"Did you get rid of them?"* Dennis inquired curiously, but the Japanese witch simply shrugged her shoulders and replied, *"A few broken limbs should be enough to hinder them." "Most harmless battle of this civil war,"* Lopt mused. Familiar with the equipment at hand,

Franziska was the first to man the spaceship and instantly occupied the driver's seat. Finally, she, Sharon, and Lucas rose into the horizon. The other portion of their contingent left the base without encountering any trouble in doing so. Skilfully steered by Franziska's wand, the UFO hovered southeastwards.

#

Their futuristic aircraft boasted an interior that could be described as lean and simplistic. Portillo, a quick learner and overall adaptive person, operated the navigation devices. His eyes widened, panic flushing through his body as he spotted three fast-approaching objects on the radar. Sharon Waterfield rushed to the back, using her phone like a telescope once more. *"Those are their guided rockets! Let's not lose any time, use the invisibility potion dispatcher and manoeuvre!"* Franziska pressed the button, but nothing happened. Hastily, she pressed it eight more times, still to no avail. *"The indicator says there's potion left. It must be a malfunction." "You're saying this like it's no big deal!"* Portillo scoffed anxiously. *"You'd better come up with something solid or else we'll end up as crashed fragments!"* Franziska pressed her cerebrals to the limit. *"Eureka! I know,"* Eibe cheered festively. Her wand pointed leftward at a forty-five-degree angle, but instead of holding it in place, she maintained the angle and drew it towards her body in a half-circle to her right side. The spaceship tilted to the left, instantly lost speed, and drifted rightwards behind the magically guided rocket system, which housed only a camera at its front. Relief washed over the three, almost rendering them dumbfounded. *"Blimey, you did come up with something solid, bloody bahookie!"* Sharon complimented her fellow witch's wit, patting her back in praise. Now unfazed by further attacks, their trip to Athens continued.

Chapter Twenty three – Songs of Orpheus

Throughout their night journey, they encountered only sparsely lit settlements along the rocky Balkan coast. It was quiet, no one fought, and not a single soul seemed eager to disturb the solemn silence

of the all too fragile peace. Greece perfectly blended into this collective refusal to fight, although the atmosphere was marked by loss and sadness. Franziska landed the UFO within a park on the city's outskirts. Whilst walking through the ancient town, they stared into the empty eyes of the people. There was an absence of joy, anger, or anxiety. Everyone seemed to have resigned themselves to a future without sunlight. *"A huge air battle must have taken place here. Look at all these crashed jets and UFOs*," Lucas commented, shocked by the collateral damage. Sharon observed that the population had simply adapted, using these wrecks as extensions of their buildings. Some homeless folks had even occupied the spaceships, just spacious enough to be inhabited, and made them their homes. One UFO had been converted into a public shower.

In the distance, perched on the hilltop, the Acropolis stood reverent and impressive. Right next to it, an imposing flag fluttered, blue in colour and displaying a white symbol. It resembled a half-circle on a horizontal line, with three stripes, one vertical and the others angled at forty-five degrees to its left and right. Sharon Waterfield did not recognise it, but Franziska Eibe knew of its significance. "*That's the flag of an order called 'Songs of Orpheus', one of the oldest orders within the greater magical community. They've always been an integral part of this city. Unlike many other capitals, Athens did not fall to the Lancers."* The astute Franziska felt a great surge of shame as her eyes settled on a fighter jet marked with the LNO's insignia, forcefully lodged in the temple's front due to a crash. *"It's still hard to fathom that I believed their lies. Too many wizards did,"* she muttered. Sharon hugged her. *"That's why the two of us need to prevent all of this. See it from this side, at least you received a second chance. Many of your former order's members fought and fell on the wrong side of history."*

#

The trio approached the building carefully. Portillo focused on retracing his own steps, a task that stirred feelings of worry and unease, reminiscent of his last encounter with the relic and the burdensome consequences he had carried for such a long time. But he was stern enough not to let these dated emotions get the better of him. The column situated at the northern centre brought his memory flooding back.

"That's the place. I stepped right behind this pillar and fell through the floor. There, the Hammer was just lying on a marble altar," he proclaimed excitedly. *"Travelling to different universes should be one of your easiest tricks by now, sis,"* Franziska joked, fully aware of Sharon's and Tim's ventures into wondrous parallel universes. *"True that. Seems like just another Tuesday*," the Scottish witch replied. *"Although I should remind you that when we found ourselves in such situations it didn't feel like a walk in the park, but much more like a desperate struggle to get out of these places.*" Franziska stepped closer to Sharon, patting her shoulder comfortingly. Their friendship had formed quickly, binding them into an inseparable team. *"But this time will be far chiller. Think about it, Sharon, no LNO intervention, no uncertainties, just swift action.*" A surge of confidence invigorated Sharon's senses. She felt energised and ready for the task ahead.

Unexpectedly, and without any sound that could have warned them, the damaged jet's fuel tank exploded with such force that the ruins trembled. One of the columns gave way, crashing to the ground. At first, Lucas and Franziska felt a wave of relief wash over them, but it was fleeting. Some of the pillar's fragments landed on Sharon's head. As her comrades rushed over in fear and exasperation, they found only her left eye open. She was clearly drowsy and began to slip away until unconsciousness finally prevailed. "*Please don't die. Don't leave us alone, we can't do this on our own,"* Franziska cried, clutching her newfound friend's chest. *"The prophecy must be fulfilled at any cost*," Lucas hissed hysterically, frantically attempting to bandage her wound. Despite all their efforts, Sharon remained unapproachable.

A picturesque, large garden at what seemed to be midnight unfolded right before Sharon. Small bushes lined the pathways, displaying every imaginable form, some resembling fish, birds, or even geometrical shapes. All of these figure bushes were perfectly maintained, enough to make one believe they were trimmed almost daily. The fields were adorned with tropical flowers, each more colourful and intricate than the last. She hastily patted her body and, to her relief, found neither wound nor pain. She

gazed into the sky, where countless stars stared back at her, mellow and serene. The moon loomed amidst the flickering tapestry of silver and black. "*Tim would have loved this*," Sharon commented whilst Vanadis strutted along a pathway of golden cobblestones, her attire resembling an elegant evening dress. "*Tim would have loved this indeed, but don't worry, my dear, once you set things straight again, he will be able to enjoy the more beautiful things in life once more."*

"*Wait, this isn't the end, is it? I'm not in some sort of afterlife, am I?"* Vanadis chuckled wholeheartedly. "*No, you're not. It's called a near-death experience, my girl, just like the one you had back in Mit Rahina. Take this.*" She offered Sharon a large hammer decorated with jewellery and countless symbols. Sharon took it, marvelling at the finely crafted relic and wondering what all the snowflakes depicted on it meant. *"Follow the second root of the ash tree which grows in Beldon's library. Dip this tool into the well and take your friend with you,"* the ever so mysterious Vanadis commanded. *"But before I let you go, I will give you the chance to ask me anything. But I'll only answer you one question."* Sharon was instantly brooding. Vanadis had always been such a wondrous character that her existence alone left enough room for a hundred questions. Yet she decided to let her remain a mystery and opted for something more personal. *"The title of a witch's Paladin, so far I only know Tim to carry it, is it even a thing."* Vanadis shook her head with a friendly smile. *"Not really, there are non-magical people who interact with magicians, but there is no such title. The only reason Tim received it was so you would not have to carry such a heavy responsibility, saving the planet, alone. You as a team are representative of the balance between the ordinary and the magical"*

"Sharon? Sharon! Let's not get carried away, okay? We've almost done it," Franziska reminded her as she slowly regained her senses. A broad sandstone stair led downwards, following the path of a thick root. This was in no way the Acropolis where she was supposed to wake up. Sharon's mind tried to forge a reasonable chain of events to explain how she had found herself in this setting. The only conclusion available to her was that this entire adventure, at some point, must have become something slightly too much for her to fathom. Sharon still struggled to process her surroundings. The only aspect

helping her was the thick root leading downwards. It must, indisputably, be the mighty ash's root they were meant to follow to the dwell. The miraculous hammer still lingered in her hand. The question of what had happened kept looming above her fragile consciousness. After taking a deep breath, Sharon answered, *"Sure, sorry for drifting away. I'm probably just exhausted." "No hard feelings,"* Franziska replied in a calm tone, her smile seeking to restore comfort. Every step down the stairs brought the duo into an otherworldly hallway. Sharon refrained from even asking herself who had constructed this complex of staircases and passages running along the massive root. Eventually, Franziska and Sharon reached the deepest level.

Some tiny, fragmented creeks parted the wide-open plain. As they narrowed closer together, it hinted at a common source of water. Everything to the right was cloaked in an inaccessible darkness, while the other side shone too brightly to look at. *"Oh, look, that's the river all these creeks come from. We just need to cross these bridges."* Sharon's perceptive observation met with Franziska's approval. This moment of shared acknowledgement was short-lived, as High Staffwielder Surt and his minions Raintree and Angels Trumpet disrupted it. "*Make way, you morons,"* Franziska scoffed at the trio. "*Don't you see that the earth and everything on it has no future in its current state? Only the two of us can fix it."* However, her words merely brushed against Karl's zealous ears. "*A traitor and a high-ranking member…"* Sharon cast a lightning strike onto Surt faster than he could finish his words. It struck him down. *"Sorry, no time for long monologues."* From now on, it was two against two.

Raintree and Angel's Trumpet reacted quickly, performing evasive manoeuvres. One rolled to the right, taking cover behind the bridge's railing, while the other darted to the left. Spells were exchanged within seconds. Franziska aimed her yew wood wand for the eighth time as Brother Raintree's observant eye noticed her exposed forearm. *"Brustiz ja Skakaniz!*" The ramming spell he conjured struck Eibe's arm, the pain almost unbearable. Sharon, however, still had a trick up her sleeve: the handgun Franziska

had given her a couple of days before. After disabling the safety, she fired off a few pot-shots at their opponents. Although Sharon wasn't a trained shooter, her suppressive fire proved effective enough to pin down Angel's Trumpet and Raintree temporarily, buying Franziska valuable moments to recover.
That was until the drop of a potion grenade rendered them invisible. Confident in the effect of their brew, one of them launched a hand grenade directly at Sharon, unaware of the newest trick she had mastered. Even if Raintree and Angel's Trumpet benefited from being invisible, the grenade did not, and Sharon easily noticed the recognisable object. In less than a second, she pointed her Japanese wand at the river, commanding the water to rise as a wet shield, and uttered, *"Frusna iz aisa."* The grenade sank into the shield of ice, causing more harm to the attackers than to Sharon as sharp fragments of ice bounced back in their direction.

An array of other charms followed until Franziska's mind finally devised a feasible solution to their predicament. Gritting her teeth against the pain in her arm, as though it were a third opponent, she switched her wand to her other hand. Summoning all her remaining strength, she commenced a slashing movement one would normally make with a sword rather than a wand, drawing a horizontal line along the riverbank. *"Daga flioustran!"* A wave of fire swept over their opponents. Raintree's clothing caught alight, and he panicked, rushing to the river as his only escape. Tossing away his wand, he dove into the watery refuge. Outnumbered and outsmarted, Angel's Trumpet attempted to flee, but Sharon struck him with the ramming spell, and Franziska froze him into a block of ice. Franziska winced, and Sharon helped her to her feet. "*That was some intense stuff,"* Franziska remarked, her voice breathy.

"We've beaten them as a team. And since they've received no reinforcements, that might have been our boss fight. Hopefully, at least, the last one for today," Sharon concluded hastily. The sonority of her words had barely faded when the noisy sound of heavy footsteps drew closer. *"That's impossible, he should be dead!"* Franziska's voice was filled with shock and confusion as the giant Munrir now stood before them. *"Now we have to deal with a Zombie Giant, great,*" Sharon sulked. *"You're challenging my reign on this planet. I'm not going to allow anyone to do so, especially not two brats in their early*

twenties." Munrir's declaration echoed through the realm, menacing in tone. His countenance was imposing and archaic, a blend of troll and human features. Dressed in armour adorned with fur elements and topped with a large grey cloak, Munrir looked like the perfect picture of a storybook giant. Sharon and Franziska struggled to process his overwhelming presence before the fight had even begun, yet their resolve remained unshaken. "*You're not even master of your own fate. Thought you could just pillage and ravage everything and were punished by some instant karma, faggot*!" Sharon's taunt enraged Munrir even further and sparked the battle.

Munrir began by conjuring a wall of fire from his bare fist and hurling it at the two witches, who instinctively took cover behind a steep slope that parted the river from the field. Only the very last bottle of invisibility potion saved their lives as the enraged giant unleashed destruction around him. Fire, ice, and even a greenish, shimmering acid ravaged the area. Munrir did not wave a wand or chant spells, he appeared to wield raw, powerful energies, making him the most formidable foe Sharon and Franziska had ever faced. Ten minutes had already passed, leaving only seven remaining. With each second, their hope of survival faded further. "*Light. That's it, brightness*!" Sharon exclaimed triumphantly. *"I beg your pardon?"* Franziska stammered in confusion. She was unaware of a crucial feature of Sharon's wand. "*An old Japanese wizard crafted this wand from the branches of a maple tree called the 'Ever bright,' grown near the sun goddess's shrine!"* Sharon's words still sounded cryptic, only deepening the confusion. Still undetectable to Munrir, she rose from the riverbank and took aim directly at him.

This was the moment of truth. The young witch Sharon had learned much during her journey, she was thoroughly trained in deliberately navigating her flow of energy, calibrating it for the desired outcome. Now she had to gather every ounce within her and send it against him. She imagined the brightest and broadest beam of light extending from her wand that her mind could muster. "*Skinan brathin!"* Sharon yelled forcefully, her power rivalling that of Munrir. Indeed, a breathtaking column of light manifested. It clashed against Munrir with enough force to throw the giant to the ground, ending him

in agony. She and her friend Franziska were blinded for a few seconds, as the brightness she conjured was hard for any eye to bear. Finally, as their sight returned, Munrir had vaporised. There was nothing left of him, as if he had never been there to begin with. "*What the heck was that?"* Franziska asked, overwhelmed. "*You basically nuked him with light." "That's what his weak point was all along, brightness."* She sent a warm smile at the Japanese maple wand in her hand and whispered, *"Bloody braw job, Akihiro."* Now it was time for the final step. Only a few paces separated the duo from the mythical dwell.

#

"Sharon?" A distant voice sounded, muted. It was none other than Lucas Portillo, who had connected to her consciousness. The dreamscape broke, and Sharon once again found herself in a different surrounding, namely the ancient grounds of the Acropolis. *"Oh my god, she's back with the hammer in her hand,"* Franziska cheered. *"What happened? Why are we here? Didn't we follow the mighty ash tree's root?"* Portillo shook his head at her bewildered assumption. *"You've been knocked out by some fragments of the pillars, we struggled to regain your consciousness. Somehow you woke up holding the hammer we've been looking for."* Sharon tried her best to make coherent sense of what had occurred. After all, she recalled the moment when Tim had received the valuable spell book within a dream, holding the very same item in his hand as he woke. In these solemn seconds, she simply accepted that some things just can't, and perhaps even shouldn't, be explained. "*Vanadis gave it to me. I dreamed about searching for the dwell, and then we were ambushed by LNO members." "That might have been a vision. Let's pass on this information and interfere with the Lancers' ambush,"* Lucas conspired.

#

Despite all the odds set against them, their mission down there in Greece was a complete success. With the requirement for time travel now in their possession, it was time to return to the Black Forest. The journey back was almost wordless between the three of them, as there was plenty to organise with their order at home during the flight. Messages were exchanged back and forth until every point and each detail was indisputably clear. Franziska kept steering the spaceship seamlessly through the evening sky as

if it were her usual choice of travel. Recapping what had really happened during barely two months, she too fell into a pensive silence. She also thought about what should be done after their time travelling, pondering on how her new role as a good witch might look. The TFF's impenetrable messaging app ran almost constantly along their route through the Balkans. Franziska Eibe did her best to sate her curiosity by listening to the exchange.

#

Firstly, Lopt Slygod negotiated access to the secluded library guarded by the gentle giant Beldon, which would enable the TFF to properly monitor the entire path leading to the dwell. Beldon swiftly gave in and did not regret his decision. Merely two hours later, Raintree, Angel's Trumpet and High Staffwielder Karl Surt attempted to sneak into these ancient hallways with the intent of laying an ambush. Sharon's dream proved to be almost prophetic, almost, since fortunately, Munrir did not rise from the dead as a Zombie Giant. Although no one could ever disprove that Sharon had not engaged and defeated him, in spirit at least. No one was willing to argue with the concept that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. There were simply more important concerns to address, and Sharon's inner victory remained undisputed. After the Lancer top dogs were captured, a chain of events brought the rest of their corrupted order, at least regionally, to their knees. The morale amongst their troops reached an all-time low, and they abandoned their local headquarters for good. Tons of documents still lingered there, in both digital and analogue form, yearning to be deciphered by the TFF. Their density of useful information was groundbreaking.

Franziska Eibe barely managed to land the UFO due to her and everyone's sheer exhaustion. Earlier that morning, High Staffwielder Theo had insisted that the two of them begin time travelling immediately. Both witches fought tooth and nail against that decision and finally won their argument that they would need their full focus for such a massively important mission. The Task Force Firs displayed surprising flexibility and skill, keeping the entire perimeter under watch throughout the night in shifts,

rotating regularly. It is worth noting that not long ago, almost every mission the order undertook ended in chaos and upheaval. The girls secured their well-earned rest, and the day concluded successfully.

#

By late afternoon, refreshed and invigorated, Sharon and Franziska made their way towards the well. The young Scot's colouring had been fading more and more, but on this day, she regained her characteristic chestnut brown hue. Emily Walton had officially retransformed into Sharon Waterfield. Martin, Miko, Theo, and even the bright giant Beldon accompanied them to the well. The well appeared surprisingly mundane, yet timeless and slightly reverent. Sato Miko's eyes brimmed with unshed tears. Martin embraced her, his arms providing a protective cocoon. Sharon reiterated her promise. *"Don't even think of being worried. One of the first tasks on our list will be to rescue you from Neon Island."* *"That's not why I'm almost crying. I trust you so much."* The Japanese witch held back her tears, displaying strength. *"It's just that we've gone through this epic adventure and finally stand here. We did it, and there's not a single one here who hasn't contributed to it."* Sharon caressed her shoulder, acknowledging the weight of the moment and understanding where her friend was coming from. Franziska took Sharon's hand, her backpack holding the invaluable documents. "*Ready?"* she asked. *"Readier than ever before,"* Sharon replied, dipping the enchanted relic into the well. "*Where do you wish to travel to?"* the watery surface inquired, its voice sounding distant. *"The tenth of July 2015, nine o'clock, Kühltal Ganglerstreet eight,"* Sharon replied.

Chapter Twenty four – Twisting Destiny

The two witches almost fainted during their journey through time and space, such were the immense forces required for this leap backwards in time. Sharon was on the verge of completely losing consciousness when she found herself facing two boys shooting hoops, trying to outmanoeuvre each other

around the basketball hoop attached to a wooden pole in their yard. It was an image not unfamiliar to her. Franziska upheld a giddy smile and pointed towards the sun. "*It's insanely refreshing to see everything as it should be. I feel like I'm five years younger."* Sharon had neither the intention nor the means to counter her argument. "*That's so braw, it's like waking up from a nightmare."* They turned around and saw Tim's family home, unharmed, perched there unburdened and peaceful. It was almost unbelievable what the two had achieved. Thus far, deliberate time travelling was unanimously perceived as an almost impossible task within the greater magical community. Sharon and Franziska had succeeded where countless of their peers had failed. The relief they felt was nearly incomprehensible.

"To be frank, I didn't expect this to actually work…" Sharon uttered in a shaky voice. *"But experiencing time travel first-hand is just incomparable to anything.*" Franziska placed her hand on her shoulder, a symbol of the camaraderie they had forged. Her tone, however, and her frown indicated a serious undercurrent. *"We're both excited to see Tim again, but you have to keep something in mind. Every single day that occurred in this terrible, now thankfully alternative, future didn't unfold. That means only the two of us know what happened. You're going to enter Tim's apartment as a complete stranger. So, when we ring the doorbell and go in, allow me to explain everything, as he doesn't know you yet. Neither does he know anything about all these intricate magical affairs. Don't just jump into his bed and smooch him up. I know you won't, but emotions can be misleading*." Franziska's explanation wasn't necessary for Sharon's analytical mind, though her inner surge to see Tim again, a person she had once been reluctant to become acquainted with, made her unpredictable.

Tim Meyer himself couldn't have known whom he was bound to meet. He was just about to write the first word on his bright green empty poster, which he used to help him make sense of his first prophetic dream, when the doorbell rang. Through his intercom, he heard the familiar voice of Franziska announcing herself, and he buzzed her in. She entered ahead of Sharon but, a few steps before reaching the doorway, Sharon nudged Franziska in the side to gain her full attention. "*Perhaps it's better if I wait here until you've clarified everything with Timmy. I'm worried it might be a bit much if I appear out of*

nowhere." Franziska acknowledged Sharon's concern, as it wasn't entirely unfounded. "*Hey Franziska, what brings you to visit me? The gym, as always*?" the blissfully ignorant Tim asked innocently.
His friend cleared her throat and gestured for him to take a seat. "*Well, usually yes, but this time, I need to tell you something that's bound to blow your mind. It might be better if you sit down*."

Restlessness swept through Tim. In full detail, Franziska explained everything that had happened. From his upcoming encounter with the oak spirit Audun to their escape towards Neon Island, she concluded her account with the current journey back in time. Tim's own recent experiences played a crucial role, as without having witnessed these events, he would never have believed her. The last detail that fully convinced him was Franziska's awareness of what he was about to write on the green poster, as well as the dream he had planned to share with her. Her memory functioned like a well-oiled machine. Tim twisted the skin on his hand, trying to determine if it was all just a dream or not. "*I can't believe I've jumped through so many loops with this witch... that so many of my friends are gosh darn wizards*." His breathy voice faltered for a moment. "*And this witch who's going to fully captivate me, she's here with you?*" Franziska was just about to confirm his suspicion when Sharon, who had been listening to the entire conversation, strutted gracefully into the room with the confidence of a highly acclaimed and experienced movie actress. Despite her elegant poise, she herself felt a strong sense of euphoria upon finally seeing Tim well and alive. "*That must be me, sweetheart*." Sharon cooed into Tim's ear before placing a soft kiss on his cheek. One might have presumed the love-starved Tim would faint, but instead, he simply sat there and beamed brightly enough to melt steel.

The insight Sharon Waterfield and Franziska Eibe gained provided the Taskforce with a tremendous advantage. It made the venture to the pillar of light and its protective enchantment appear as easy as walking through a scenic park. Even before the barbecue evening took place, Tim contacted Martin via Broomracer 101, who reacted almost in shock. He repeated the same procedure with Lopt and Richard, although, funnily enough, Tim wasn't even in need of escaping into another realm. The only reason he and his newfound girlfriend, Sharon, did so was to evacuate Sato Miko from Neon Island.

Already familiar with the situation around Mit Rahina, the entire TFF, with the support of the Ghayat al Hakim, obliterated the Jaish al Saharin in a swift and clean operation. It caught them completely unprepared as the Ghayat undermined and destroyed their observation posts after the TFF picked them off one after another. An almost painful relief ran through Sharon as the protective circle was finally drawn around the pillar of light. The charm conjured a bright shimmer around it, tenfold more powerful than Miko's vessel trap. Everything seemed ideal, as not only the summer but the planet as a whole was saved from chaos, confusion and darkness. It goes without saying that Tim was rewarded with the title of 'The Witches' Paladin' for his lifetime. Sharon became widely regarded as a hero within the greater magical community and wore this acclaim with humble gratitude, knowing that everything had turned out well.

The two evolved into a couple and life seemed immaculate until a horrible nightmare tormented Sharon. At first, her physical reality of moulding comfortably against Tim's chest was mirrored within her dreamscape. Countless wizards of the LNO tried to attack the pillar of light, but every spell cast on the mythical structure deflected against the protective circle without even reaching it. Then, all of a sudden, Munrir himself entered the stage, cloaked in a dark veil, breaking through the circle on the third attempt and feverishly destroying it. Her next nightmare unfolded with countless images of Lucas Portillo spending years within the LNO's prison complex, in agony and despair. Somehow, through all the sense of triumph she and the entire TFF felt, Sharon had entirely forgotten to liberate him. Without Lucas Portillo she would have been unable to travel back in time and fix everything. Leaving him rotting inside the LNO's prison complex felt like an unjustifiable and outrageous form of ungratefulness.

She shifted vividly, her facial expression revealing the torment she must have felt until the waking world finally reclaimed her. Sharon did not jolt up and hyperventilate. Instead, she remained silent for a moment, recovering from her nightly ordeal. Knowing that such a dream should not simply be swept aside and ignored, she woke Tim by nudging him on the arm. *"Erm, darling, I know you won't like what I'm about to say, but unfortunately, we aren't quite done yet."* Tim responded with an exhausted sigh, listening to Sharon's retelling. A new Saturday was heralded as the first sunrays crept through the

shutters, marking yet another hazardous adventure. After getting ready for the day ahead, Tim played some classic hip-hop instrumentals on his sound system. He needed the laid-back, optimistic edge of those tunes to awaken his strategic mind. It was necessary for him to stay level-headed.

"See, my witch, I'd love to simply dismiss this dream as a mere nightmare. However, the very possibility of something like this happening worries me a heck of a lot. Not to mention that poor individual, Lucas. Based on your retelling, he played a huge part in your journey through time. We need to act." Sharon took a sip from her water flask, following the steps of his pensive pacing. *"But how can we fight that bloody giant if we don't even know where he is? The information we stole says nothing about his location. It must be a well-kept secret."* Tim pushed his mind to its limit until it finally offered something useful. His eyes widened as he snapped his fingers. *"The Lancers don't know we've got Franziska on our side. We need to forge a convincing story to explain her absence from the Order."* *"That's braw!"* Sharon replied enthusiastically. *"Hear me out,"* she said, commanding Tim's attention. *"Franziska was caught while observing us. We interrogated her, but bravely, she didn't utter a single word. Unable to find proof of her connection to the Lancers, we let her go."* This unexpected creativity deeply impressed Tim. "*Brilliant idea! Now the question is why she needs information about Munrir's dwelling and her motive for freeing Portillo."* Unable to come up with an explanation on their own, they invited Franziska, Martin, Miko, and Theo over to draft a new plan. This time, Tim prepared more thoughtfully than ever before, shutting every window and dimming the lights.

The team assembled quickly. Franziska and Sharon gazed at each other with a tinge of unease, as the darkness within the room reminded them of the sinister future they had avoided. *"Coming back from a supposed interrogation seems like a very good pretence for being away that long. I only have to make it believable."* Franziska's reply stirred the High Staffwielder's train of thought. *"I can only agree, but you do not resemble a thoroughly interrogated person in any way. You need to look like someone who has had*

a rough time." He aimed his wand at her, and everyone was taken aback by the sudden movement. *"What the heck, you're not going to hurt her, are you?"* Theo raised an eyebrow, dismissive. "*Of course not, but I am going to change her appearance with a spell." "Doesn't this one only work on objects that don't have their own will?"* asked Martin Fink, who was familiar with this particular spell. *"Yes, as there is resistance. That is why Franziska needs to fully trust me, otherwise it will not work."* The young witch closed her eyes and took a deep breath. *"Fine, I'm ready."* Theo's imagination drew a clear picture. *"Stainan iz niwaz,"* he cast.

After a thin layer of smoke cleared, Franziska's cheek was marked, her right eye surrounded by a dark blue swelling. Her friends looked at her with concern, but even as she touched her skin, it did not hurt, nor did she feel any pain at all. "*Chill, I don't even feel it. Now it's time to properly get into character."* Wordlessly, with a few swishes of her own wand, she adjusted her attire to make it look equally strained. Miko broke the silence with her challenging tone. "*We're only halfway there, we still need to find a reason to ask for Munrir's exact location." "It's easier than it seems,"* Franziska said confidently. *"I'm going to claim that I've heard about Lucas Portillo's existence, saying that I overheard some distant chatter from you folks, that you clearly plan to capture him, hinting that his knowledge about time travel could pose an entirely new threat. What could be a safer place for Lucas than Munrir's dwelling itself, escorted by a loyal witch who withstood interrogation?"* A small round of applause filled the chamber. The plan was now set and on the verge of being put into action.

Within this reality, the Lancers Headquarters still stood proudly, housed by the fanatic order, the lifeline of a disturbing ideology. Sky Eye, Lopt's observant raven, followed Franziska along the treacherous path she took through the forest to reach the estate. This minor detail was also meant to make her Sharad more believable. A lancer who had been busted would most definitely prefer a route that was not easily traceable. Her mind had yet to accept that the Lancers' headquarters was fully functional and briskly operating. Reaching the gate, she spoke the code word, *"Bright, soothing sunlight with no clouds in sight."* As soon as she entered the basement, numerous LNO members swarmed her with countless

questions, but she insisted on speaking to Surt himself. He led her into his office. Karl's voice sounded far more untrustworthy now that Franziska knew the Lancers' true nature. She played the game of deceit, which the Lancers had taught her flawlessly, with ease. "*They wanted to know the location of our base."* Franziska displayed a prowess that would make one assume she had taken acting lessons beforehand. *"I remained silent, but they kept pressing me with the question, 'Where's Portillo, the time traveller?' Of course, I said nothing, even after they beat me, claiming that someone would snitch eventually."* Surt looked at her with worry. *"Their curiosity isn't totally unfounded. Lucas Portillo is a prodigy when it comes to time travelling." "What if the TFF captures him and he helps them instead, out of spite towards us? I hate these ignorant fools!"* Franziska acted imperceptibly. *"We should bring him to our most secret spot."*

Karl Surt ordered her and Sister Deadly Nightshade to take the Spaniard directly to Munrir's dwelling. Since neither Nightshade nor Franziska, now back in her role as Sister Monkhood, knew the Giant's location, he provided them with coordinates and a private, unobtrusive vehicle. Before the High Staffwielder could dismiss her and send her on the mission, she asked to speak to Lucas herself, explaining that perhaps she could connect with him, that it could be worth a try. He agreed, unaware of her true intention, and informed her about the secret prison complex.

The moment Franziska entered his cell alone, she told him, "*You're going to be transferred now. Once you cooperate, your life could be so much better."* While uttering this statement, she showed him a piece of paper, *"TFF about to liberate you, play along,"* and burned it with a spell. Her former Order sister, Deadly Nightshade, had nearly caught her in the act, a delay of barely two seconds had saved her. Franziska, stirred by the abrupt interruption, took a deep breath to steady her pulse. "*The vehicle is waiting outside. We're using a car as the means of travel, a black Mercedes, to be precise."* Franziska felt a faint hope budding. She could definitely contact her teammates, instructing them to tell the raven to

pay close attention to the model and number plate. *"Prudent choice, sis,"* she answered with feigned camaraderie. Franziska tried to draw her phone before the journey began, before it was too late. Yet each time she dared to open Broomracer 101, another Lancer passed too close to avoid raising suspicion. Finally, she had an idea and let some elixir topple over after brushing forcefully against a shelf. Deadly Nightshade turned around to check the source of the high-pitched noise. *"Can you not behave like an elephant in a glass house?"* Nightshade scoffed at Portillo, assuming he was to blame. *"Try to run when we're outside. I only need five seconds, trust me,"* Franziska whispered into the Spaniard's ear while the others were distracted.

A heavy weight lifted from Franziska's and Lucas's shoulders as they left the Headquarters' oppressive interior. Forcing a neutral expression onto her face, she gestured to him with a wink to start the second distraction. Franziska turned her attention to the gate, pretending not to notice. *"Stop right there!"* Deadly Nightshade shouted at Lucas and aimed her wand at his legs. *"Bind hina fastaz,"* she cast at him, a spell meant to bind someone. Yet his zigzag evasive manoeuvre made it difficult for her to catch him within the spacious yard. Franziska typed as quickly as she could, providing Cyo with the car's number plate and model to give their raven a reference. *"You could have helped me, sister!"* Nightshade scolded her sharply after recapturing Lucas. A bead of sweat ran down Franziska's forehead. She had to think of an excuse quickly. *"I thought I saw a drone above us and became suspicious. We'd better head off quickly."*

#Theo observed the action with the aid of his raven, which this time wore a camera attached to its chest and connected to his monitor. The High Staffwielders decision-making had to be swift and efficient, and years of experience helped him greatly. Astutely, he reached out to Tim and his three companions, who waited patiently for news. Theo told him to get equipped, shove his friends into the BMW and provided him with the LNO Limousine's model, colour and licence plate number. The four had to act quickly, as soon as their adversary's vehicle left the narrow forest route, the raven would no longer be

able to keep up. Miko, Martin, Sharon and Tim felt readier than ever, the will to finally complete their adventure reflected in their eyes. Even Tim's coupé had been modified with invisibility potion outlets and extra sturdy tyres.

As they already knew, Munrir's cave had to be located somewhere near the Czech border, which was why he drove eastwards, aiming for the next motorway entry. The absence of rain and the heat at the peak of summer had formed a dry, almost steppe-like landscape, conjuring dust onto the countryside roads. *"Hey, that's a black Mercedes E-Class,"* Sharon announced for the eighth time, yet this one finally matched the licence plate. *"Bingo, darling,"* Tim confirmed before a wave of worry hit him. *"Let's hope Franziska plays her role well." "Let's rather keep some distance, we don't want them noticing us following,"* Sato Miko interjected. Some twenty minutes of driving followed until both cars reached the motorway entry, with an additional two hours to enter Bavaria. Everything seemed to be working out so smoothly that it struck Tim as deceptive. *"Ehm, Timmy, I hate to say it, but take a look at your fuel."* Tim, who was fully focused on nothing but the mission, had subconsciously ignored the low fuel warning on his instrument panel. A cold shiver of shock rushed through him. Running out of petrol on the motorway was one thing, but losing sight of their enemy's car was another. Martin pressed his hand against the hard surface in thorough frustration. *"How can someone be so dizzy!"* Miko added angrily.

The four had no other option but to aim for the next pull-in. Next to them stood a Finnish caravan owned by a middle-aged Finn, who enjoyed his coffee while comfortably seated on a sun-faded plastic garden chair. Tim's face was marked by self-doubt as he sat behind the steering wheel, Miko's by burning anger. Martin glanced at a nearby ash tree with disappointment, making one believe the innocuous plant was somehow to blame. The only one bothering to find a fitting solution was Sharon Waterfield. Despite the lack of optimism, an idea sparked within the intricate system of her mind. She opened the boot and took out an ice scraper, which Tim had stored there for the cold seasons, attached to it a brush that could

be used as a broom. *"It may be a stretch, but this time it just has to work,"* Sharon mumbled, filled to the brim with determination. Browsing through her spellbook, she finally found the right enchantment, one usually used to grant ordinary household brooms the ability to fly, a single magical property that set them apart from the mundane. Being well-equipped with witchcraft supplies paid off for the Scottish witch, as the only ingredient necessary, elderberry elixir, was safely stored inside her hidden tactical vest.

Sharon poured it over the tool against ice and snow and recited the charm from her book. *"By aiwaz spel sunnon jah moon, thu skal wisan flugandaz broom."* A short but intense shimmer radiated from the tool in her hand. The Finn, who had inadvertently witnessed the scene as it unfolded, stared in shock. He tried to smell if there was any booze in his coffee, then walked back into his caravan and shouted, *"Perkele!"* Unbothered, Sharon rummaged under the BMW until she fixed the ice scraper securely beneath. With a wide grin, she told everyone to get back into the car. *"Turn the engine on, Timmy,"* she instructed, self-assured of a positive outcome. He frowned at her illogical suggestion. *"Trust me.*" The instrument still indicated the fuel tank was empty, yet Tim's coupé began to move solely by the command of Sharon's wand. Admiration for his witch washed over Tim and his friends, who were now on their way once more. "*Sharon, my darling,"* his voice praised, *"I don't know many witches, but you must be among the brightest."*

Chapter twenty five – The last song is sung

Cruising along the motorway, the four friends had almost abandoned all hope. They had encountered thousands of cars, it was like searching for a needle in a haystack. Ahead, behind, and on both sides, all remnants of belief seemed to have drowned in a steadily rolling ocean of metal and rubber. The situation appeared dire until a traffic jam halted the steady flow. In front of them was the black

Mercedes E-Class with the matching licence plate. Inside the elegant limousine, Agent Franziska played her role accordingly. Both vehicles left the motorway, heading towards a quaint rural area that reminded Tim Meyer a lot of his home region, the Black Forest, albeit with much less narrow valleys. A message received through Broomracer 101 interrupted the tense suspense that invisibly prevailed within the car.

#

"The cave won't be in sight, it's hidden beneath a large, remotely located barn, apparently a sham building. Keep some distance from our car, I'll guide you along." If it weren't for such a significant mission, Tim would never have steered his car through narrow dirt roads in the forest. At least the dense canopy of dark needle trees proved sufficient to veil them in secrecy. Not without reason, Tim activated the invisibility potion's release, brooding over the possibility of observant enemy ravens. An open plain, with ample fields, contrasted sharply against the woods. Franziska advised her friends to remain at the forest's brim at all costs. Furthermore, she suggested ambushing a group of LNO guards patrolling nearby, in order to establish an even greater safe zone for them. The four quickly turned into a cunning guerrilla force. Three enemies had been iced by Miko's, Martin's, and Sharon's spellcraft. Tim used some invisibility potion for the first time on himself and dragged the bodies into the forest. As no bird was in sight, they took on their adversaries' uniforms, only Tim was left without one. *"The password for entering is 'The last song is sung',"* Franziska informed her friends at her first chance via text message.

A rueful expression crawled over Tim's countenance as his friends, all equipped with the ability to utilise magic, asked him to stay in the car. Tim Meyer subconsciously felt insulted and redundant. Although he was, also in this altered timeline, able to conjure magic at times, it was only due to his close proximity to Sharon, and highly unreliable. Some parts of her energy continued to nurture his own powers, but during this fateful mission, there was simply no room for a lacklustre skill set, no place for an expectable flatline in magical prowess. Sharon assured him that she was more ready than ever to face Munrir and sealed her promise with a searing kiss before leaving Tim to the car and his thoughts. Every

minute that passed felt like exhausting torture, a crippling suspense, until he grew increasingly drowsy and eventually fell into a deep slumber behind the steering wheel.

#

The dreamscape welcoming Tim was once again reminiscent of the Hollis Gondler movie series. However, it wasn't the mysterious, radiant Vanadis who greeted him, but an old wanderer who looked exactly like the one depicted on the beer label, raising his glass to him. His voice matched both that of Audun and the Bull from Memphis. There was an air about him that betrayed a palpable confidence, making one believe that the mysterious wanderer might be someone both a universal genius and an old, understated, reserved gentleman. *"Good day to you, adventurous young lad,*" the deep voice greeted him. A fatherly presence calmed Tim's bafflement. *"Audun, seldom do you appear for insignificant occasions. I can sense there is something you wish to inform me about."* The former oak tree, now a wanderer, took a seat in a big director's chair. "*Great tales always end with a climactic peak. The victory we seek seems so far away until we unexpectedly obtain it. Why should your story be any different?"* Tim expected nothing good from this hidden warning, spoken in allegory. *"Action..."* Audun calmly stated while removing the veil from a mirage hovering over the ground. It depicted Miko and Martin using all their fleeting power to shut down a large gate with their wands. Meanwhile, Munrir, the menacing giant, hurled flame after flame at Sharon, who couldn't leave the cover of a stalagmite that was slowly disintegrating. *"I need to do something!"* Tim shouted in panic. *"But I have neither weapons nor magic on my side."* A single tear stirred by anger and frustration ran down his cheek.

"The odds heavily weigh against you," Audun confirmed, an undercurrent of shared sympathy in his voice. Assertively, he reached into the unfolding picture, turning it into a blurred image. Tim stood there, wordless in awe. His otherworldly guide pulled a spear with a blue, shimmering blade out of the floating mass. *"Ailill Belenus' spear. This shall give you some advantage. Nevertheless, keep in mind that it does not render you invincible, nor does it guarantee immortality."* Tim Meyer accepted the wondrous ancient weapon, its length making it more of a lance than a spear. "*You're basically telling me I should lance the Lancers?"* Tim mused, his optimism newly won. Audun chuckled richly. "*It's up to you what*

you use it for. Stick it to them, I guess, you have an edge," he threw in as a rejoinder. *"Remember, even the most magical of tools is still just an enchanted piece of equipment without its wielder. You may be a regular bloke from the countryside, someone who'd rather listen to hip-hop instrumentals than strive for greatness. But your witch saved the daylight, now you're obliged to save her. Go out there and rescue your folks. This time it's on you, only on you."*

#

Shortly after, the young German woke up, not inside but, oddly enough, next to his car, standing, not lying, with the lance in his hand, its blade emanating a blue, menacing light. Encroached by the weight of this meaningful weapon, he turned his gaze towards the barn that lingered in the distance and looked all too inconspicuous to house so much trouble. "*If I just knew how to get in there,"* he mumbled to himself. A crazy idea claimed his consciousness, one that seemed more born of desperation than of collected wit. Tim entered his coupé, holding the lance out of the window like a medieval knight. *"For the sake of everything, if there's any chance of me having magical powers, let me have them here and now."* Tim's plea towards the horizon met unexpected reciprocity as the image of the cloud-weaving woman unfolded in front of him once more. The scenery elicited a bright beam from Tim. Just as Sharon had, Tim constantly asked himself how, in all worlds' logic, people like Audun, Vanadis, and all those fantastical beings, and the act of magic itself, could possibly fit into any reasonable explanation. Though the even more grounded fact that he simply had to accept and act made him refrain from contemplating.

"I hate to play the hero, but guess I've no bloody option left," he murmured to himself, a tinge of reluctance swaying in his words. Tim ignited the engine, mentally attuning himself to commence an attack run. But something held him back. It wasn't a lack of eagerness or anxiety, but the simple material fact: the fuel tank was empty. "*Oh great, I'd need three arms to steer the car, hold the wand and the lance,"* he mumbled in frustration. *"On foot it is then!"* Once more, he left the car as a white Mercedes 180 closed in. Tim's eyes brimmed with an unusual blend of confusion and recognition. *"Looks like*

Richard's car, but the hovering makes it very suspicious to be one of the LNO's vehicles." So he blocked the path, magical weapon ready in hand, bracing for a confrontation with Lancers.

To his surprise, a familiar face lowered the window. *"Hey Timostein, out of fuel, huh?"* Tim was oddly glad to hear his name mutilated for once. *"Midländer! Richard! How come you know about this?"* the young, confounded German asked euphorically, sliding into the seat next to his Norwegian friend. *"Bro, I had nightmares about this situation. I'm acting here on my own, no orders."* Tim felt a rush of joy and contentment flood through him. He was grateful to have such a great friend. *"You're a brilliant unit of a friend, man. Without you, we'd be in massive trouble."* Richard braced himself internally for the upcoming fight. *"Tim, even though we've been nothing but chat mates for the longest time, you mean a lot to me. We've grown up together in a sense. You're obscure now and then, but our friendship is as real as it gets."* Reverence for the weight of those words cascaded down Tim's spine. *"Let's clap some evil cheeks, shall we?"* Richard suggested with a triumphant smirk. *"We have to,"* the Norwegian magician replied. *"Although this time, I've got a plan to sort the situation."* Richard summoned an armada of ravens for support, overwhelming the Lancers' birds with sheer numbers. *"Now they're blind. Let's lure them out of that bloody barn."* Hovering over the field in their Mercedes, they cast an array of charms against the structure. Tim suddenly grew creative, wielding Ailill Belenus' lance like a staff. He conjured a precise flame and set the barn alight. Thinking they were under major attack, countless LNO members stormed outside. That was the moment Midländer had feverishly been waiting for.

The enemies swarmed into the nearby woodlands, searching behind every tree and under every rock in high hopes of finding their attackers. Some of them were equipped with a new device visibly resembling a flamethrower, recently designed to counter invisibility potions. Within their tanks, a liquid was stored, fern and St John's wort brewed under a full moon. Its steam was meant to destroy the invisibility potion's veil of secrecy. Fortunately for Richard and Tim, the enemy did not expect a threat from above, which is why the two levitated with their Mercedes to avoid any contact with their

adversaries. Once every lancer had entered the woods, leaving the field vacant, the two slowly descended into the cave, completely unbothered. Its interior wasn't set up much differently from the regional headquarters near Kühltal, except for the countless stalagmites and stalactites. Amidst the cold, ancient, wet structures, storage spaces, monitors, and emblems lingered, yet there was an absence of prison structures or unidentified wonder weapons. After seventeen minutes of roaming through the seemingly endless labyrinth, not only did their invisibility potion begin to fade, but so did their resourcefulness. *"What's that weird hissing sound?"* Richard inquired nervously. Tim gulped and pointed at the snake-like dragon creature that resurfaced from an underground river.

#

Not even five minutes prior to this, Miko and Martin found themselves confused by the absence of physical force pushing from the other side. Even Munrir was evidently exhausted and had ceased attacking Sharon with fire and ice. The obnoxious yet dim-witted giant assumed he had already crushed Sharon, who, against his assumptions, still hid behind a tiny reversed slope and had barely any freedom to move. Martin and Miko had been outside of his field of view the entire time. *"Where are all these lancers at?"* Miko asked Martin in utter bewilderment. Martin suggested*, "Let's very carefully have a look. Let's not risk anything."* With their wands pointed, the two retraced their steps. When Miko spotted the scary serpent in front of her, a fierce grin formed on her likeness, which even frightened Martin. "*Tell me what's going on." "I can bet my life that this is the serpent, was the exact one, that attacked my former order."* She hissed, *"This time, you're the unprepared one, you ugly thing!"*

The serpent turned its body towards the Japanese witch, yet she was faster, conjuring a powerful lightning strike against it. With a deafening screech, the serpent's scales burned. It arched back forcefully and was pierced by a sharp stalagmite. Sato Miko blew over her wand's tip as if it were a steaming revolver, though her moment of victory turned into utter surprise. The monster's shape no longer blocked their view. Richard and Tim, riding the floating Mercedes, came into sight. Albeit interesting on its own,

it wasn't the flying car that caught her attention, but the impressive lance Tim held. "*Miko, Martin! Glad to see you in one piece. What about Sharon?*" Tim asked, his anticipation unbearable. Fink calmed his senses. "*She's unharmed but in hiding. Munrir assumes she's already dead." "I suggest we free her with a good old magical drive-through*," Richard said daringly. Martin and Miko entered the back seats. "*The very last charge, my friend?"* Tim asked him, his optimism palpable. "*Let's grill some giant,"* Richard replied.

#

Sharon, meanwhile, was caught between two decisions. She could either retreat silently or try to reignite combat with the menacing giant. "*You can do this. Munrir is still a threat to everything. Think about the future you've avoided*," she whispered to herself. The silence was broken by her four friends entering the large grotto, casting four spells at short intervals. Martin Fink froze his hand. Sato Miko blinded his left eye. Richard Midländer cast a ramming spell at his knee. Tim Meyer sent a lightning bolt against his forehead. Seriously injured, the giant rose for his final counterattack just as the determined Sharon did the same. *"Skinan brathin!"* With the full might of her power, she focused on that one spell, hurling a monolithic ray of light at Munrir, delivering the final blow. Drunk on the rush of victory, she ran forward, aiming her wand at the collapsed delinquent. *"That's the last act. I'm going to prevent you from doing any more harm."* Aiming her miraculous wand at him, she conjured, "*Stainan iz niwaz."* Munrir's motionless body turned into a forceful vortex, finally settling into the form of a tiny garden gnome, unable to hurt anybody ever again. His momentary mental absence had allowed it.

"*You did it, love! I feel more joyful than ever to festively proclaim that the prophecy is finally fulfilled,"* Tim yelled euphorically as he embraced Sharon dearly. The young witch lifted her feet giddily and allowed herself to be propelled, a rush of satisfaction and joy sweeping through the group. *"Erm, bro…"* Richard interrupted. *"I hate to break the moment, but we still need to get the heck out of here. The lancers could come back any minute."* An intrusive honking startled them, yet the shock lasted only a

moment, as none other than Franziska Eibe and Lucas Portillo, now free from the energetic confinement he'd been captured in for far too long, stepped out of the black E-Class. *"Come on, folks, I know how to get out of here. Follow me closely. Richard, don't hover, use your wheels."* The two-vehicle column moved slowly upwards through the cave's intricate road system. The first LNO members returned from their fruitless search mission, though Franziska knew exactly what to do. She used the voice-raising enchantment to settle their concerns. "*This is Sister Monkhood, code white. I repeat, code white. Everything's clean down here."* The deception worked long enough for the friends to escape safely.

#

After more than two hours of driving, the seven magicians gathered near Kühltal's outdoor cooking spot. It was almost reverently quiet, as if the group's relief had become contagious to their surroundings. A scenic crescent loomed on the horizon, accompanied by countless flickering stars. A warm wind rushed through the woods, reverent to the marvellous triumph. "*That's been the most daring adventure I could ever imagine myself going through,"* Sharon whispered, her voice brushing against the night. Tim ardently rested his left arm over her shoulder, drawing her closer. Martin and Miko mimicked the endearing gesture. *"Even as a full-fledged wizard, it's still hard to comprehend,"* Portillo added. Tim walked up to his Norwegian friend, placing a hand on his shoulder. *"Once, you mentioned moving nearby. If you still wish to do so, you're welcome." "Thanks, Timoshenko. I'll come back to that."* Instead of growling at this name mutilation, Tim laughed, and so did the others, heartily.

Richard kept his promise and became part of Kühltal's close-knit wizard community, which brought his and Tim's friendship to a new level. With his strong sense of humour and colourful personality, he effortlessly expanded his social circle even further. Due to its invaluable service to humankind, the TFF was elevated from a mere task force to a true order, renamed 'The Seidrist Thing'. This name harked back to the order that had once spanned the now-dissolved Kalmar Union and had inspired the fantastic tales of Hollis Gondler, which captivated the hearts of millions of fans. Sato Miko

found her calling in resurrecting the band of magicians she had originally come from. With the help of her boyfriend and trustworthy companion, Martin Fink, she did her best to summon all wizards within the Mie Prefecture. Her order's old base, Shiroi Mahō, was soon brisk with life once more.

Exhausted by the adventure, Lucas Portillo left the magical community, returned to his former job as a car salesman, and was swiftly employed with the assistance of the Seidrist Thing. He may have laid his wand to rest for good, though he often attended the festivities organised by Tim and his clan. After being sternly persuaded by Tim, Dennis's uncle Fricco informed his nephew about his true identity. Dennis Stamm found himself thoroughly intrigued by witchcraft and soon integrated magical practices into his refined craftsmanship. Locally, he became a renowned carpenter. In light of the crucial help she had provided the TFF with, Franziska Eibe was completely redeemed from her associations with the LNO. Just a short time afterwards, and to everyone's surprise, she developed a deep crush on Dennis. The two married and started a happy family. If one saw the love and care Franziska held for her baby and for Dennis, it would be impossible to imagine her once being part of a sinister order. An insatiable urge to be honest with Bedirhan pressed Tim into telling him about the hidden world of magic and its countless orders. He thoroughly and at length explained the reason why he couldn't invest more time into their once-cherished online shop. Though Bedirhan initially struggled to accept the truth, he took some of his savings and went on a cruise holiday with his girlfriend, Ekaterina. With the endless ocean's waves gently crashing against the ship, he began to understand and returned a wiser man.

High Staffwielder Theo asked Hugo Mispel if he would like to work alongside him in a two-man task force, and he gladly accepted. Their aim was to watch for any emerging threats that could once again endanger the world. Their name, The Restless Warden, soon became highly regarded for their unwavering drive to keep the magical community clear of nefarious elements. The Lancer of the new Order, on the other hand, more or less disintegrated. With their sinister master hexed into a garden gnome, there was no reason to pursue their agenda any longer. Most of them left the Order at the first opportunity. Those

resistant to any form of betterment formed mafia-like bands, engaging in the drug trade and human trafficking, mostly within the magical community.

Life in Kühltal itself remained tranquil and unassuming, just as it always had been. The rivers kept flowing, the trees kept growing, and the valleys stood resilient, eager as ever to shield the folk nestled within from trouble and uncertainty. Sharon's analytical mind and logical thinking, developed during her computer studies, led her to delve further into the world of enchantments and spellcraft. Eventually, it propelled her far enough to begin working on her own spellbook, with charms ranging from welding metal with her wand to closing wounds without the help of a plaster. Tim grew increasingly accustomed to the magical society and even, once in a while, successfully cast a spell or two on his own. In the year 2017, he decided to finally propose to Sharon, who happily accepted. Oftentimes, he leaned back into the comfort of his office chair, enjoyed a mouthful of tea, and revelled wistfully in the vivid memory of everything that had occurred during that frantic, hot summer of 2015. He still struggled with the question of how a couple of weeks could so profoundly shift one's perspective on life and widen one's horizon of possibilities. One day, while clearing out the attic, he inadvertently found his prophetic childhood drawing, depicting the war that had somehow unfolded in a different, dark alternative reality. He was not naïve to all the bad that existed on Earth, but found solace in the thought that he had done his part to prevent evil. He and Sharon were most certainly not the kind of heroes one expects to be reliant on, but it's only due to them that the sunlight is still shining.

The Spell Glossary

"Mit der Kraft Isaz frerst thu."

– Obsolete spell to freeze objects or people.

"Oh Aiwas, zeih der Arnebei, birubi sie ihr Giwahrnissa."

– Robs the opponent of their senses, rendering them unconscious. If heard by the target, it is ineffective, therefore, it must be cast from concealment.

"Frusna iz aisa."

– Modernized freezing spell, which has the same effect as *"Mit der Kraft Isaz frerst thu."*

"Moe yo."

– A Japanese spell that creates a burning beam of light, similar to a cutting laser.

"Hikari o motarasu."

– This Japanese spell also produces a beam of light, but unlike *"Moe yo"*, it serves solely for illumination.

"Stainan iz niwaz."

– Used to transform objects into another shape or state. The spell requires strong imagination and can only be cast on mindless targets that are not in control of their senses.

"Skinan brathin."

– Produces a beam of light, whose size and intensity can be adjusted by the caster.

"Ufhebana meina Stimmon."

– Amplifies the volume of the caster's voice.

"Bliksmeduz."

– Summons a lightning bolt that can be precisely directed at a target like a projectile.

"Swe drobaz du mariz, swe seedalaz du trewaz, grow."

– Alters the size of an object.

"Kori ni koru."

– Japanese freezing spell, can be cast quickly and inconspicuously.

"Daga flioustran."

– Sets the target ablaze.

"Karbana in."

– Grants the ability to use the wand like a pneumatic chisel.

"Till air ais gu do chruth tùsail."

– Returns objects to their original state, Celtic repair spell.

"Brustiz ja Skakaniz."

– Spell for ramming gates, doors, or walls.

"By aiwaz spel sunnon jah moon, thu skal wisan flugandaz broom."

– Transforms an ordinary cleaning broom into an enchanted one suitable for flight.

"Nu thu dutiz min anabuda."

– Essential spell for imbuing objects with long-lasting magical functions, such as a magic mirror that shows events in a specific room.

"Ihtazz thumma tasallab."

– A spell used exclusively by the Bedouin order Ghayat al Hakim, employed to construct and collapse tunnel systems.

"Bind hina fastaz."

– Used to bind the target object and requires a strong will from the caster.

"Ris ja hit min staban nithra gadalwa."

– Causes the target object to levitate. It remains in the air until the magician makes a lowering motion with their staff.

"Skirmiz mik fastuz Algiz."

– Protection spell that must be cast quickly to repel incoming magic. The protection dissolves upon collision with the opposing spell and must always be recast.

THE END